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#TFA

The Intersection of Social Media and Education Reform

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Abstract

Teach For America (TFA), a teaching not-for-profit organization that recruits and places non-certified teachers in traditionally difficult to staff schools and districts, has without doubt helped shape the growing conversation of education reform. And while this contribution can be found in the teachers it trains and the alumni who venture into education leadership roles, it can be readily found in the realm of media, and in particular, the social media of Twitter. This paper provides an analysis of 15,304 “tweets” that were sent by, or to TFA and its top officers as well as all “tweets” including the “hashtag” of #TFA. As an exploratory analysis of the content and audience of tweets sent by core TFA individuals and including TFA related “hashtags,” we show that TFA rarely engages with critics as it uses the media of Twitter to reinforce its reform rhetoric within its own reform coalition. Moreover, we assert that the action of ignoring questions and counter-narratives in social media, for example, is grounded on the assumption that neoliberal educational reforms are seemingly above reproach and beyond critique.



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Introduction

Teach For America (TFA), a teaching not-for-profit organization that recruits and places non-certified teachers in traditionally difficult to staff schools and districts has, without doubt, helped shape the growing conversation of education reform. While this contribution can be found in the teachers it trains and the alumni who venture into education leadership roles, it can also be found in the realm of media, particularly social media given TFA's history as a public relations power house (Gardner, 2013; Strauss, 2013). In fact, over the last few years, many education policy organizations and proponents have increasingly used Twitter to reach out to supporters, promote ideological agendas, and debate opponents. Given the topic of this special issue of *Critical Education* (e.g., the media's role in promoting the neoliberal reform agenda), we put forth the argument that social media, especially Twitter, is rapidly becoming more accessible than "traditional" media outlets. Moreover, we suggest that traditional media outlets themselves often utilize Twitter to promote stories and perspectives before they are broadcast on television, and thus Twitter has become a new mechanism of traditional media. TFA has become a significant component of the educational reform landscape through its placement of teachers (Brewer, 2014b) as well as its policy advocacy through its spinoff political arm known as Leadership for Educational Equity (Cersonsky, 2013). And while TFA does not place a significant amount of teachers when compared to all teachers placed in school districts, it does place them in high-concentration clusters within the districts/schools they work (Christmas, 2006), and the political advocacy through its alumni network has proven to be catalyst for furthering neoliberal reforms that seek to privatize public education by way of charters, vouchers, etc. (Jacobsen & Wilder Linkow, 2014).

Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine: (a) how TFA engages with/uses Twitter to promote and defend its brand and message; (b) who TFA engages with – or ignores – in the ongoing digital conversation surrounding education reform; and (c) what evidence is provided by TFA during this digital conversation.

Considering the growing debate surrounding TFA in academic venues that challenge the effectiveness of TFA corps members (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010, 2014; Veltri, 2010), the limited preparation they receive prior to becoming the teacher of record (Brewer, 2014a), the lack of diversity and cultural competence among its cadre of teachers (Bybee, 2013), the employment of deficit ideologies in their pedagogical practices (Anderson, 2013), as well as similar critiques in public venues (Barnum, 2013; Black, 2013; Cersonsky, 2012; Cody, 2012; Diamond, 2012; Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Eaton, 2010; Kovacs, 2011a; Miner, 2010; Simon, 2012), gleaning an understanding how supporters and detractors discuss TFA in the media realm of Twitter will provide a candid insight into the current role TFA is playing in shaping educational policy conversations. This is particularly important considering TFA has repeatedly suggested that it wants to have a conversation about what is best for children (Villanueva Beard, 2013b). Because it provides a venue for open dialogue, Twitter stands to facilitate a unique portion of that conversation. Thus, this work examines how TFA uses Twitter to promote and defend its image while simultaneously engaging in the larger – and online – dialogue surrounding education reform. More specifically, as will be examined below, TFA largely ignores public critique – despite claims of welcoming such conversations. The organization's ability to intentionally disregard critics serves as an artifact of the strength of

neoliberal logic that proclaims the “failure” of public schools (an assumption often promoted by media outlets) and that organizations like TFA are a commonsensical component of education reform. Given the growing impact that social media is beginning to have – in conjunction with or in the replacement of traditional media – on the discourse and direction of education policy reform, understanding how organizations use and talk about such reforms is vital. More specifically, as TFA continues to be a major contributor of alternatively certified teachers in the nation’s neediest schools, it is paramount that the research community and key stakeholders evaluate what is being communicated to TFA’s members, funders, detractors, and similar organizations.

The Neoliberal Reform Agenda

Much has been discussed recently surrounding the neoliberal agenda and its impacts on educational policy. In short, the neoliberal agenda seeks to reimagine and reallocate state-funded and operated programs into the hands of individuals and corporations. Grounded in Milton Friedman’s (Friedman, 1955, 1997) assertion that government involvement in education is ineffective and inefficient, the argument, so it goes, is that the transfer of public control into the hands of private entities naturally produces greater efficiency and thus effectiveness. TFA fits nicely into this neoliberal paradigm committed to injecting competition into a practice and realm previously held in “monopoly” by state entities. That is, TFA operates as a component of the neoliberal “‘marketplace’ [that is] oriented toward a vocational, de-professionalized version of teaching as training for low-paid service work rather than as professional, critical intellectual public work” (Saltman, 2012, p. 25) while simultaneously catering to the neoliberal insistence on reinforcing quantified pedagogical approaches that lend themselves to the profit realm of high stakes testing and an elevation of the individual over the collective good (Brewer & Cody, in press). TFA’s ability to promote their version of reform is bolstered by the hundreds of millions of dollars it receives from private venture philanthropic organizations (such as the Walton, Gates, and Broad Foundations) that have historically advocated neoliberal reforms (deMarrais, 2012; Kovacs, 2011b; Saltman, 2010).

Yet, between the theoretical foundations of neoliberalism and the reforms in practice lies a unique set of assumptions. The assumption that free-market competition will naturally equate to efficiency and effectiveness is an ideology that surrounds itself in commonsensical and patriotic rhetoric and is therefore beyond reproach. Accordingly, challenges or critiques of unfettered competition are often undermined by associations with socialism or as a manifestation of unpatriotic activity – especially given the role of capitalism in the United States. Thus, because the questioning of free market ideals and practices carries with it a stigma of being anti-patriotic and anti-capitalistic, such challenges are easily ignored or diminished by those promulgating neoliberal reforms. TFA uniquely embodies this “liberal” ideology as it hijacks civil rights language to promote its brand of reform (Kumashiro, 2012; Weiner, 2013). In fact, TFA corps members who challenge or question components of their experiences are often met with skepticism of their commitment to children or the civil rights movement of our era (Brewer, 2013) and, by default, operate in favor of the status quo of “failing” schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). The discourse surrounding TFA has also taken on this characteristic of neoliberalism in its seemingly overt assumption that the organization, its theoretical beliefs, and its pedagogical practices are above reproach or critique. As will be explicated below, TFA embodies this “above reproach” ideology in its use of Twitter. Given that much of the neoliberal reform movement

relies on a seemingly commonsensical rhetoric, questions or critiques of market-based reforms are drowned out by the dogmatic assumptions that underlie the reforms (e.g., that competition is naturally beneficial) or, as opposed to espousing rhetorical support in favor of markets, some critiques are completely ignored by those who champion the reforms. Considering the latter of the two options, critique and dialogue are necessary components of improvement and consensus whereas a cold-shoulder response, as it were, implies that the opinions and actions of an individual – or in this case an organization’s opinions – are above reproach. A recent study that examined the impact that Twitter has on opinion formation found that “public opinion often evolves into an ordered state in which one opinion dominates absolutely in the population. Moreover, [the authors] found that agents would rather express their opinions than change them” (Xion & Liu, 2014, p. 6).

TFA and the Traditional Media

TFA has enjoyed a predominately positive representation within traditional media. Operating from the foundational assumption that because TFA recruits from prestigious universities, its members are not only smart enough to teach but also possess the requisite skills that are seemingly lacking in traditionally trained teachers who teach in urban schools. Much of the media representation of TFA has been a parroting of TFA talking points, and many media outlets like the Huffington Post, for example, have been all too eager to promote positive or defensive stories about TFA that are occasionally written by TFA staffers (Boyle, 2013). In 2013, CNN Money and Fortune Magazine listed TFA among the top “100 Best Companies to Work For” – TFA was ranked at 60, up from 70 in the previous year (CNN Money, 2013). Though, it should be noted that this ranking does not include TFA corps members, rather is exclusive to paid staff members. In January of 2013, Fox News promoted the following story,

Weather Underground terrorist-turned-academic and Obama confidant William Ayers is taking up a cause near and dear to teachers unions: bashing a program that sends young, idealistic college grads into the inner city to teach poor kids. The nonprofit Teach For America is a “fraud” whose participants are nothing but “educational tourists,” said Ayers, a onetime associate of President Obama who was a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago before retiring. (Tenney, 2013)

Ayers’ critique, while representative of a very common critique of TFA (Cody, 2012; Eaton, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Lind, 2013; Miner, 2010; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010; Veltri, 2008)– that is, TFA corps members’ short term status as teachers – is immediately undermined and dismissed by associating Ayers with “terrorism,” “Obama,” and “teacher unions,” where the latter two typically do not receive a welcoming audience at Fox News. Other traditional media outlets help TFA promote “research” that seemingly justifies TFA’s model (Newlon, 2013); yet those outlets do not promote critiques of or questions surrounding the validity of those studies (Vasquez Heilig, 2013) because, again, the commonsensical rhetoric of neoliberalism and TFA are beyond reproach.

During the same three-month time frame as our study, the following national media outlets archived news stories with the tag “Teach For America”: The New York Times promoted two stories (Rich, 2013; Schulte, 2013), the Huffington Post promoted three where one was

authored by founder Wendy Kopp, one authored by current co-CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard, and one authored by a TFA alumna (Kopp, 2013; Riggs, 2013; Villanueva Beard, 2013a).

Method

Using descriptive statistics, this article examines how the leadership of TFA leverages social media to disseminate information as well as to promote its view of neoliberal education reform.

Data Collection

We collected a comprehensive list of tweets between June 5th, 2013 and September 5th, 2013. Since all tweets are public, one does not need to follow a certain organization in order to collect such information. Using the program Tweet Archivist (www.tweetarchivist.com), 33,402 total tweets were collected. In all, there were 15,304 tweets sent by, or to, the four Twitter accounts of @teachforamerica (the official Twitter account of TFA), @wendykopp (Wendy Kopp, founder and current Chair of the Board), @villanuevabeard (Elisa Villanueva Beard, current co-CEO), and @kramer_matt (Matt Kramer, former President and current co-CEO). The total tweets per username were as follows: @teachforamerica (11,167), @wendykopp (1,722), @villanuevabeard (1,630), and @kramer_matt (785). Further, over 18,098 tweets were sent that include either the “hashtag” #TFA (16,716) or #teachforamerica (1,382).

Coding and Analysis

The users mentioned in tweets were broadly coded as either “In Coalition,” or as “Opposition Coalition.” This dichotomy, while limited by the fact that not all things or individuals are always completely on one side or another, proved to be an efficient method for broad coding. To provide more detail to the coding, the grouping “In Coalition” was further coded into “TFA Official,” “TFA Alum,” “TFA Staff,” “TFA Corps Member,” “TFA Affiliated,” “In Reform Coalition.”

Information on how to code the users mentioned was gained by visiting each user’s Twitter account, examining the user’s tweets, and/or visiting the user’s webpage (if listed). Since one cannot include an actual attachment on a tweet, evidence was coded based on whether the tweet included a link, from where the original evidence was posted, and who authored the original evidence. We chose to collect data from these four user accounts as they represent not only the official TFA Twitter account but represent the top three ranking officials within the organization (founder and Chair of the Board and the current co-CEOs). All Twitter user accounts are identified by the “@” symbol followed by a username of choice – assuming it is available. Users often use the symbol “#” to indicate that their tweet is about a certain topic (e.g., #TFA). According to the Twitter Help Center, “the # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages” (Help Center, 2013).

The label of “TFA Official” was given to usernames that are owned and operated by TFA. While the official TFA username of @teachforamerica needs little clarification, others are not as immediately obvious. However, upon visiting the Twitter profile page of other usernames that were given the label “TFA Official” it becomes clear that the username is officially affiliated with TFA. For example, @passthechalk, and @Latinos4Ed are both TFA initiatives,

@TFAHawaii is one of many regional TFA usernames, (and @TeachForAll is the international version of TFA).

Identifying users as a “TFA Corps Member” or as “TFA Alum” on Twitter was not a tall order. All of the usernames listed under this category had overt statements on their user profile indicating their current status as a TFA corps member. In some instances it was listed as “@TFA corps member,” or “2012 Chicago Teach For America corps member” or simply as “TFA 2010 Corps Member,” which at the time of data collection would indicate the individual’s status as alum given the two-year commitment. In many cases, this was the first information listed on the user profile.

Similar to “TFA Corps Member” and “TFA Alum,” almost all user profiles labeled as “TFA Staff” were so labeled due to the overt listing of their position within the TFA network; for example, profiles indicated, “TFA MTLN, New Orleans” or “Head internal comms @TeachForAmerica.” It should be noted that many TFA Staff are likely also TFA Alums (Brewer, 2014a).

The label of “TFA Affiliated” was given to those usernames owned by companies that were founded by TFA alums, organizations that partner with TFA (e.g., KIPP), or companies that benefit TFA monetarily (e.g., Bank of America and Colgate). Those usernames labeled as “In Reform Coalition” were often CEOs of charter networks or those who were current “TFA Corps Members” or current “TFA Staff.” After collecting and coding all of the relevant tweets, we used descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis to code and examine both the type of Twitter user and the content of their tweets. Trends identified through these analyses are presented in the findings section below.

Findings

Here we report our findings from the data collected from Twitter. Table 1 shows the top 25 usernames that used Twitter to discuss TFA during the three-month period of data collection. Those usernames included in Table 1 represent instances of tweeting “at” the Twitter accounts of @teachforamerica, @wendykopp, @villanuevabeard, and @kramer_matt and/or the use of the “hashtags” #TFA or #teachforamerica.

Table 1
Summary of Twitter Data

Username	Number of Tweets	Broad Categorization	Specific Categorization
KatieOsgood_	565	Opposition Coalition	
EdHawk1	219	Opposition Coalition	
BadassTeachersA	191	Opposition Coalition	
Latinos4Ed	165	In Coalition	TFA Official

VillanuevaBeard	149	In Coalition	TFA Staff
BEXwithanX	137	In Coalition	TFA Staff
rd_leyva	132	In Coalition	TFA Staff
sparkyourart	127	Opposition Coalition	
Minnsanity	118	Opposition Coalition	
TeachForAmerica	115	In Coalition	TFA Official
EduShyster	112	Opposition Coalition	
kramer_matt	110	In Coalition	TFA Staff
JudyBjorke	103	Opposition Coalition	
biblio_phile	100	In Coalition	TFA Staff
TFACollective	99	In Coalition	TFA Official
1TCTeach	96	Opposition Coalition	
StephParra08	96	In Coalition	TFA Staff
TFA_ECE	94	In Coalition	TFA Official
garyrubinstein	93	Opposition Coalition	
dana_bat	92	Opposition Coalition	
goawayTFA	91	Opposition Coalition	
TFAvideo	87	In Coalition	TFA Official
TFABaltimore	85	In Coalition	TFA Official
MNBATs1	83	Opposition Coalition	
AaronMoFoFrench	82	In Coalition	TFA Staff

In total, of the top 25 usernames who engaged with or on behalf of TFA on Twitter, there were 1,716 tweets from those categorized as “Opposition Coalition” while there were 1,197

tweets from those categories as “In Coalition.” And while it is worth noting that the “Opposition Coalition” dominated the Twitter discourse on TFA during the same three-month period, of equal interest is the lack of engagement that TFA gave to those tweeting at them or using hashtags associated with TFA. In all, the four Twitter accounts of: @teachforamerica, @wendykopp, @villanuevabeard, and @kramer_matt responded very rarely to those associated with the “Opposition Coalition.” The CEOs only tweeted/retweeted to the following usernames categorized as being affiliated with the “Opposition Coalition”: @brittanbeck, @DrCamikaRoyal, @drjohnthompson, @EduShyster, @garyrubinstein, and @rweingarten.

Considering the data from a more detailed perspective, it should be noted that TFA leaders demonstrated little engagement with critical tweets. When they did, they did so in a superficial way. For example, Wendy Kopp’s (@wendykopp) mention of Brittaney Beck’s (@brittanbeck) was a “retweet” where Beck asked Kopp, “How can we learn from varied opportunities for science outside of the class? Ex: In NYC I have AMNH, in rural MO.” However, the practice of retweeting did not occur with any tweet “at” Wendy Kopp from the “Opposition Coalition.”

Elisa Villanueva Beard (@VillanuevaBeard) retweeted a link to a Huffington Post Live segment where @DrCamikaRoyal (a professor of educational foundations) along with Katie Osgood (though, Villanueva Beard’s tweet did not include Osgood’s Twitter username – the username who engaged with TFA the most during data collection) debated the merits of TFA against TFA’s head of Internal Communications Justin Fong (@jgfong) – Villanueva Beard’s tweet mentioned @jgfong. Aside from the context of Villanueva Beard’s tweet, the Huffington Post Live segment itself, as a manifestation of traditional media’s assumption that TFA’s genesis and operations are good – opened the segment with the following,

Twenty-three years ago, [TFA] was conceived as a way to bolster America’s floundering education system and inject new dynamic college grads into classrooms across poorer parts of this country. But today the program is under fire from teachers and former TFA recruits for doing more harm than good. So has TFA run its course or does it simply need some light repairs? (Huffpost Live, 2013)

While Huffpost Live facilitated the discussion, the opening lines of the debate offered by the Huffpost Live anchor is telling of the historically friendly relationship that TFA has enjoyed from traditional media outlets and the reproduction of the myth that schools in the United States are woefully broken (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Elisa Villanueva Beard did not directly interact with any individuals labeled as “Opposition Coalition.”

Matt Kramer (@kramer_matt) and Elisa Villanueva Beard (@VillanuevaBeard) received these tweets directed “at” their account from John Thompson (@drjohnthompson):

@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard High stakes tests are chemotherapy kept up too long, becoming poison. Don't damage some kids to help others

@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard if we end testing stakes wouldn't all our ed differences shrink dramatically? United we could work for equity

@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard if you want to send your kid to school with high stakes, great, but dont impose that coercion on other kids

@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard Many ALWAYS abuse tests. Now its clear that testing is mostly punitive. Enough of win-lose sacrificing some

@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard No stakes imposed, willingly accepted fine. How can you value data & corrupt it? Think "opportunity costs."

Matt Kramer finally responded with “@drjohnthompson @VillanuevaBeard By ‘willingly accepted’, you mean by educators, yes? What choices shd kids and families get?” To which Johnson tweeted, “@kramer_matt @VillanuevaBeard why does tfa have a dog in this fight? let poor parents choose. just prepare teachers. dont push punishment.” Matt Kramer tweeted the following:

@drjohnthompson @VillanuevaBeard I d/n thk tests are best used for punishment. But it matters what gets learned, not just what gets taught.

@drjohnthompson @VillanuevaBeard btw, agree w/ your pt abt corrupt data. I thk more shd be done to avd that via test design and admin chgs.

@drjohnthompson @VillanuevaBeard Do you really think there shd be NO stakes attached to testing? I thk perhaps there's middle ground.

@drjohnthompson @VillanuevaBeard I have many options for my kids. Tough decision, but glad for choices. Do you thk everyone shd get choices?

Good post. I worry abt testing doing this @drjohnthompson: @VillanuevaBeard my take on the Problem and "the Talk" <http://t.co/ypKOauTzqM>

Note that Kramer never addresses Johnson’s questioning of why “TFA [has] a dog in this fight” but rather focuses on the merits of standardized testing. That is, while Kramer engaged with this critic, the conversation of why TFA is involved was never addressed.

The only instance where Matt Kramer engaged with EduShyster (a popular blogger on education issues and a username that registered 112 tweets) during this time period included the following retweet where Villanueva Beard chastised EduShyster for her anonymity: “RT @VillanuevaBeard: .@losangelista @CurtisCFEE @EduShyster Far from the truth. Happy to discuss directly. Also thk anonymous attacks r not an act of leadership.” The notable TFA alum and critic Gary Rubinstein who frequently critiques the organization, was asked by Kramer, “@garyrubinstein If you aren't supportive of the status quo, why get so defensive when we condemn it? Join us. @VillanuevaBeard.” Again, this illustrates TFA’s assertion that questioning TFA’s involvement in education reform or its operations is a direct correlation of supporting the “status quo” of failing schools and thus undermining the “new civil rights movement” (Brewer, 2013, p. 6).

Teach For America (@teachforamerica) retweeted the following tweet from Villanueva Beard @VillanuevaBeard: "A great nation ensures that every public school is a good school." couldn't agree more @rweingarten <http://t.co/PRx9...>” representing the only instance where Randy Weingarten (President of the American Federation of Teachers and occasional critic of TFA) was mentioned by TFA or its officers.

These artifacts are telling of TFA’s embodiment of the neoliberal tenant that their work – the “the new civil rights movement” (Kumashiro, 2012, p. 12) – is beyond question and above reproach. @KatieOsgood_ tweeted at or used a TFA related hashtag a total of 565 times. Katie Osgood, the educator and activist who owns this Twitter account, penned a widely read “open letter” to new TFA recruits during data collection for this article (Osgood, 2013). Yet, despite the wide reception her letter received, the fact that Osgood tweeted links to her letter, and engaged in the TFA conversation on Twitter, not a single tweet from the official TFA account or the top three officers was sent directed at or in response to Osgood’s tweets.

Figure 1, below, illustrates, collectively, the number and type of user mentions by the official TFA Twitter account (@teachforamerica) and its top three officers (@kramer_matt, @Villeneuve, @wendykopp). Accordingly, it becomes immediately clear that during the three month data collection, TFA utilized Twitter to primarily to interact with its own organization, those individuals/organizations affiliated with TFA (e.g., KIPP, for example), and those individuals/organizations within the larger reform coalition. What is most notable, however, is how little TFA engages with those individuals/organizations that represent the Opposition Coalition.

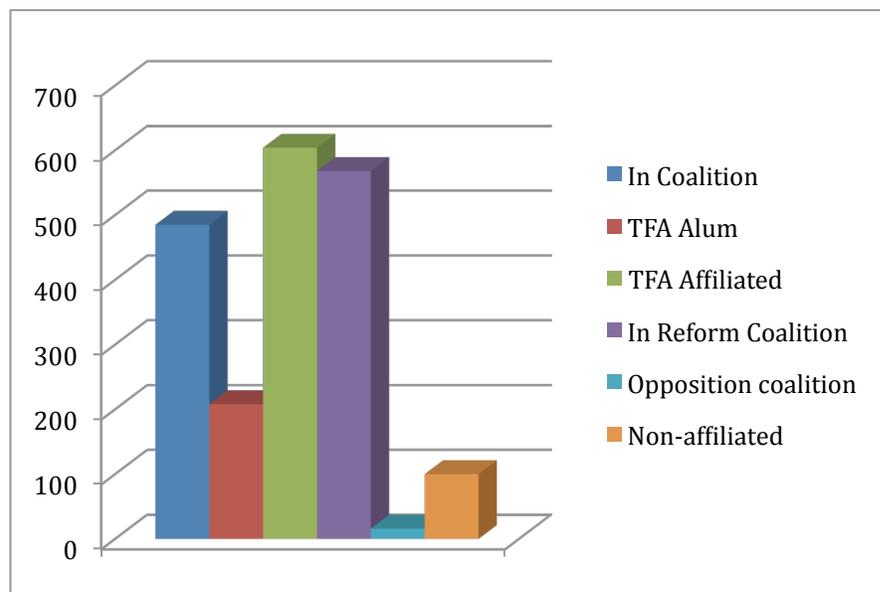


Figure 1. Number and Type of User Mentions by @teachforamerica, @kramer_matt, @Villeneuve, @wendykopp

Figure 2 illustrates the number and type of user mentions by just the official Twitter account for TFA (@teachforamerica).

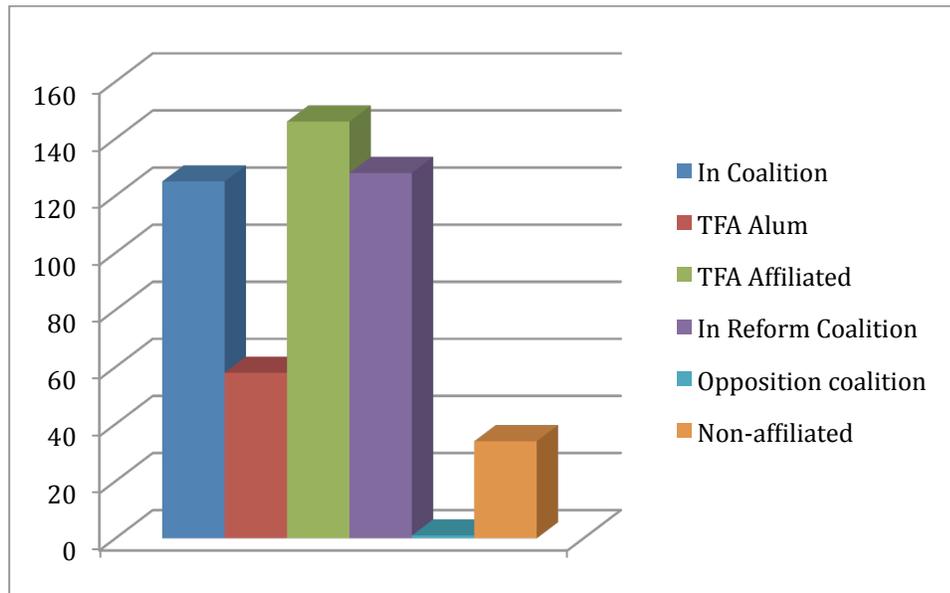


Figure 2. Number and Type of User Mentions by @teachforamerica

Figure 3 illustrates the number and type of “evidence” disseminated by the official TFA Twitter account and its top three officers. As is evident, the bulk of links that were included in tweets from the four Twitter accounts represented opinion pieces – often penned by a TFA staffer or alum. Following the inclusion of links to opinion pieces, links to partner or donor sites were second in quantity. Thus, in all of the links tweeted by the four Twitter accounts associated with TFA, there was not a single instance where a link provided access to dissenting findings or scholarly articles. While peer-reviewed articles are largely held as the mechanism by which information is judged for value, when neoliberal assumptions about competition and privatization are taken for granted, there need not be mechanisms by and through which such claims are validated. Kovacs and Slate-Young (2013) noted that TFA is able to engage in the practice of “bypassing” peer-reviewed research given the amount of money the organization spends on lobbying. Moreover, the “research” that TFA does promote is largely irrelevant, indicates mixed findings, or is inconclusive at best. Further, the only two peer-reviewed studies promoted by the organization are shown to be irrelevant to any claims of effectiveness and act only to “pad TFA’s resume” (Kovacs & Slate-Young, 2013, p. 78). Kovacs and Slate-Young conclude that this practice enables the further “selling” of unwarranted and unproven reforms peddled by organizations that are, in effect, able to ignore and reduce the importance of scientific inquiry.

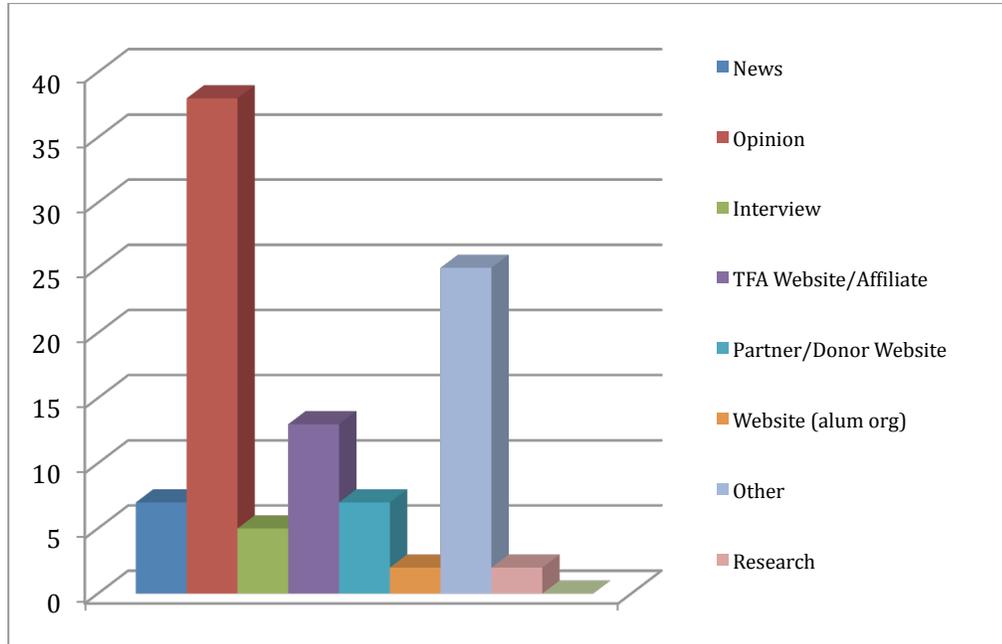


Figure 3. Types of evidence disseminated by @teachforamerica, @kramer_matt, @Villeneuve, @wendykopp

Figure 4 indicates the type of unique user mentions from the four TFA affiliated Twitter accounts. As is illustrated, the majority of those user mentions from the four TFA affiliated Twitter usernames are within TFA’s network (e.g., In Coalition, TFA Staff, TFA Alum, etc.).

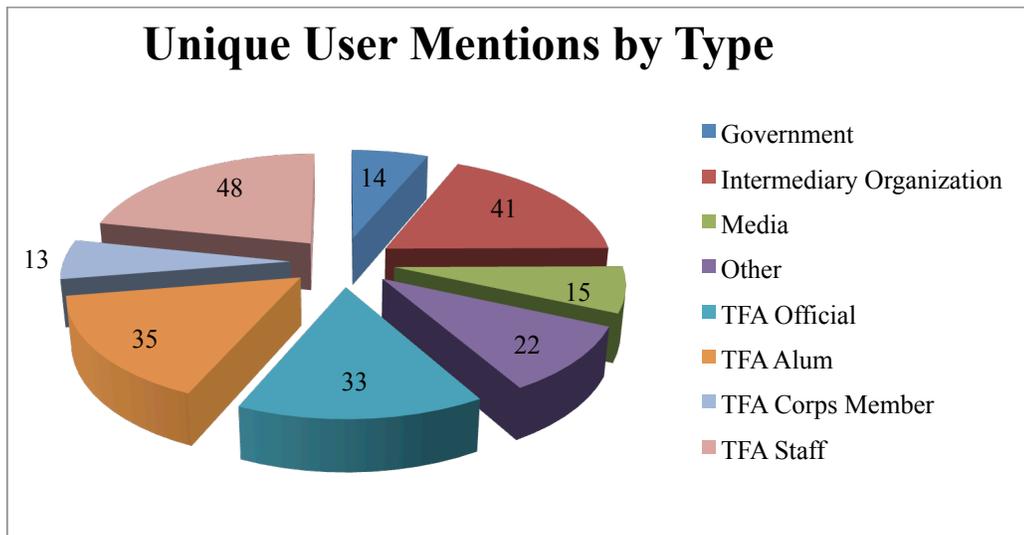


Figure 4. Type of user mentioned by @teachforamerica, @kramer_matt, @Villeneuve, @wendykopp

Discussion and Conclusion

As TFA continues to grow as an organization and power player in education reform, it is of vital interest to understand how its message of reform is promoted by and reproduced through forms of media. Twitter, as a new form of mainstream media, has provided TFA with a natural outlet to disseminate its point of view on reform. This analysis has provided an initial first examination of how TFA utilizes Twitter to promote and/or defend its brand of education reform. Twitter, as a new form of media, provides any user with the ability to engage in conversations or simply attempt to shout louder than the next person. Yet, while TFA has repeatedly suggested that it wants to have a conversation about what is best for children (Villanueva Beard, 2013b), during our three-month data collection the four accounts we examined did not use Twitter to engage in a broader conversation about education with those who offer a different perspective on what is best for students (e.g., the “Opposition Coalition”) as it focused on interacting with those in or near the organization. TFA’s Executive Vice President of Regional Operations Kwame Griffith (2014) recently penned a blog entitled “Answering Questions from the Twitterverse” where Griffith attempts to debunk so-called myths surrounding TFA and the #resistTFA event that took place earlier in 2014. The “Twitter Chat,” led by Students United for Public Education, sought to elevate the hashtag “#resistTFA” to a trending hashtag on Twitter in an effort to promote a counter-narrative – a goal that was accomplished (Strauss, 2014). And while Griffith’s response indicates an instance of TFA responding to media criticism, it is clear that the opportunity to expand the conversation and perhaps employ suggestions for change was ignored in favor of simply reiterating TFA’s typical talking points.

Data presented here suggest that TFA embodies the neoliberal assertion that free-market competition (e.g., TFA providing privately trained teachers compared to traditionally trained teachers) is naturally beneficial to those practices that are traditionally operated by the state. Moreover, while the majority of those who used Twitter to raise questions about TFA or provide counter-narratives, such critiques and questions were essentially ignored by the organization itself as it spent the bulk of its time promoting its image and reinforcing those within its network and organization. This, in our view, reinforces the notion that market-based educational reforms are seemingly above reproach and therefore those organizations promoting such reforms are not responsible for kowtowing to those who question their motives or practices. Given that public education ought to be a public and democratic endeavor, it is unsettling that Twitter, as a form of media that has the potential to elevate and expand conversations, has seemingly become yet another mouthpiece to reinforce predetermined assumptions about education reform.

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