Angling the Truth:

How Sponsored Content and Media Framing Impact the Charter School Movement

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis enti-
tled

ANGLING THE TRUTH:

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MOVEMENT

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, is worth of acceptance.

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I dedicate my thesis work first and foremost to my family. My husband Shawn who so graciously looked after our three young children on many nights and weekends so I could focus not only on this project, but my studies. His willingness to listen when I was feeling frustrated and provide encouragement was one of the main reasons I got through this process. Without those words every so often, I would not have been able to complete this as quickly as I have. My children, Sydney, Cameron and Harrison who always kept me motivated to finish what I started and show them that hard work can pay off.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the influence of information and understanding by parents of school-aged children as it relates to the charter school movement in the St. Louis area. By examining this topic using the framing theory, the researcher conducted focus groups where 24 participants were asked to read two articles- one written by a journalist, one written by a sponsored content provider. From there, users were asked a series of semi-structured questions related to the articles in order to access the potential influence these two articles had on their understanding of the charter school movement in the St. Louis area.

By diving into this unexplored area of study, the researcher identified that even though participants were able to decipher between journalism and sponsored content, they felt as though both articles in the study didn't give a complete picture of the issue and sparked more questions than answers when it came to their understanding of the charter school movement in the St. Louis area. Ultimately, the researcher discovered the inundation of information and the frames used in the articles led to misunderstanding and confusion when it came to the charter school movement in the St. Louis area.

*Keywords: charter schools, framing theory, media literacy, sponsored content, journalism*

# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

## The Hook

The American educational landscape is changing. From sweeping reform with President Obama's Race to the Top initiative in 2012 to the continued push for charter schools that began in Minnesota in 1990, what students are being taught and how that work is being communicated to the general public continues to evolve. As education systems throughout the United States work to identify how best to serve a diverse population of students, other factors such as sponsored content (SC) and media frames serve as information sources that can help or hinder the general public's understanding of the charter school movement.  Adding to this, is the flood of information audiences are receiving from multiple sources. It challenges the reader to not only comprehend what they are reading but analyze it in a way that contributes to their overall understanding of an issue (Tully & Vraga, 2017). This study builds on that idea by examining how stories are framed by both sponsored content providers and journalists and then taking those insights a step further by exploring how those influence media literacy and understanding about the charter school movement in the St. Louis area.

### Timely and Timeless Area of Research

What makes this study relevant today and for the future is twofold. First, education in American society is seen as an indicator of its success. As Will Durant, American writer and philosopher wrote, "Education is the transmission of civilization" and by investing it it, society views it as an indicator of prosperity for its citizens now and for future generations (Mackey, 2015).  Understanding this implicit facet of American society, it is clear to see that working to

understand the frames used by both sponsored content and journalists when it comes to education is imperative because the frames used help people make sense of the world around them and the issues of importance (Goffman,1972).

The second reason why this area of research is timely is because of the steady expansion of charter schools in the St. Louis area. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education currently recognizes 36 charter schools in the City of St. Louis (DESE, 2018). That number has grown exponentially since charter schools first opened their doors in the St. Louis area during the 2000-2001 school year with Lift for Life Academy and Premier Charter School (DESE, 2018). In addition to that growth, charter schools operating in the area have been the focus of journalists and sponsored content providers by talking about their success and the need for expansion due to their high test scores, diversity of students as well as demand by parents trying to enroll their child (Delaney, 2019). However, many scholars have cited research showing mixed results when it comes to actual student achievement when it comes to evaluating public school students and their charter school peers (Carnoy, et al., 2005; Finnigan, et al., 2004; Henig, 2008; Hoxby, 2004; IRP, 2008). It is this intersection of journalism, sponsored content and charter school growth that proves why this research can help bring an awareness to parents, educators and journalists on the influx of information and how it helps or hinders understanding.

**Research Problem**

Journalism, as well as public education have gone through a bit of a public perception problem over the past 20-30 years (Rossmeier et al, 2015). This decline in trust directly correlates with the public's trust in government (Pew Research Center, 2017). The Pew Research Center began tracking trust in government beginning in 1958. Dwight Eisenhower was president and

three-quarters of Americans trusted public officials (Pew Research Center, 2017). Even though the 1960's and 1970's saw a continued downturn in the public's trust of government with the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the 1980's all the way into the early 2000's saw a resurgence of trust by government officials with the highest numbers seen shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Pew Research Center, 2017). That high level of trust only lasted a few months before continuing a downward trend with the lowest levels of trust recorded in October 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2017). At around the same time that public trust was waining, the first two charter schools were introduced in the St. Louis area. As mentioned earlier, Lift for Life Academy and Premier Charter School both opened their doors at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year (DESE, 2018). This was also around the time that the idea of school choice started to gain more traction with the creation of charter and magnet schools, voluntarily transfer programs as well as transfer options under President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). In the years that followed, the public discussion about educational choices for students increased with President Obama's 2008 Race to the Top initiative that offered much-need funds in exchange for policy implementation and charter school expansion (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Also adding in to this equation was widespread media coverage of Race to the Top. With headlines that read, "Five Ways Race to the Top Supports Teachers and Students (Gast, 2014) and "Children Continue to Race to the Top Even After Funding Ends" (Lieberman, 2014) helped paint a picture for people about these initiatives and their impact. Those headlines, the frames that were used in those articles, as well as countless others about Race to the Top helped set the agenda for what people thought was important when it came to educating their

children. The tone that was set regarding charter schools then through news coverage helped introduce the public to the idea.

In addition to these issues that are covered by journalists, public school officials are also facing off against special interest groups working to influence not only what children learn in the classroom, but how people think about what a quality education looks like in this country (Phelps, 2018). With audiences getting varied information told through a variety of online resources and frames, what does that mean for understanding and comprehension of the charter school movement? Does it help or hurt understanding and who wins and loses because of this? By utilizing online publications to pay for content that shares their position, these special interest groups are attempting to influence audiences with information that appears unbiased (Chart & Kendall-Taylor, 2008). On the other side of that conversation are journalists who are also working to tell the story of the charter school movement through different frames that can influence the audience in a different way. What does all of this information actually mean for understanding? This study will explore that.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to examine how media framing by both sponsored content providers and journalists help or hinder understanding of the charter school movement in the St. Louis area. With the continued effort to expand charter schools in the St. Louis area from higher education institutions, as well as lawmakers, it's imperative to take a deeper dive into how media and sponsored content frames can not only help shape what issues people think about, but how they think about them as well (Barkan, 2013). With interest in expanding charter school access coming from lawmakers such as former Missouri Governor Eric Greitens (Schmitt, 2018), the

push to expand charter schools continues. In evaluating that influence from lawmakers, it's also important to see that several St. Louis universities including the University of Missouri in St. Louis and Washington University among others sponsor charter schools. The University of Missouri in St Louis currently sponsors seven charter schools in the St. Louis area (https://coe.umsl.edu/w2/initiatives/Charter/) and Washington University who sponsors five schools, with the most recent one opening in 2015 (https://pipeline.wustl.edu/sponsoring-charter-schools/), the growth of charter schools continue. Understanding how words and phrases can help shape a story and then taking that a step further to explore how those words and phrases ultimately shape charter school perception among parents of school aged children will prove to be an important point in comprehending what educational choices will be offered in the St. Louis area now and in the future.

By building off research done on media frames and its impact on education reform, this study will further explore what the inundation of information does to help or hinder understanding of the charter school movement. In addition, it will also unpack the challenges faced by many who consume information on a regular basis about the ideas they have about their critical thinking and media literacy skills compared to others around them and how those are helping or hindering their understanding of the charter school movement in St. Louis.

**Upcoming Chapters**

In the following chapters, the researcher delves into the past, present and future guiding principles of journalism. By working from this framework, the researcher helps set the stage with a basic understanding of the tenets of journalism and the influence it can and does have on establishing what and sometimes how Americans are thinking about issues. In addition, the researcher

explores the development and opportunities presented for sponsored content outlets to grow in the current information climate. By examining not only the media climate, but political and educational ones as well, the researcher works to help gain understanding of the circumstances leading up to the current state when it comes to the charter school movement. Each of thees factors will also be looked at through the lens of the framing theory and more specifically, media framing as a way to focus on what impact that has on understanding by those consuming media.

# CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Public education in America is under attack. Years of federal education reform are slowly being transformed and morphed into broad scoping educational initiatives that many states are struggling to meet (Phelps, 2018). From unrealistic expectations to timelines that force many states on a fast track to short-lived change, the obstacles standing in the way of public education reform quickly add up (Singer, 2016). But those intangible goals are either quickly kicked into gear or stalled substantially depending on two major factors; money and public perception of the issue (Barkan, 2015). Adding to this already complicated equation are those standing behind SC; deep-pocketed investors who are looking for an entry point into the hearts and minds of Americans. One of the easiest points of access for those with money and means is the nation's education system (Singer, 2016). By taking advantage of tax cuts and other federal incentives and programs such as the New Market Tax Credit (NMTC), the wealthy are able to set up charter schools while writing the investment off (Singer, 2016). In addition, charter schools are underwritten with public funds just like public school systems in the U.S. but they aren't held to the same testing standards, state laws, district policies guiding them on how to teach, what to teach, who they can hire and fire as well as where they can spend their money (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). The commonality that each are funded with tax payer dollars but held to different standards continues to cause friction between the two.

**Initial Understandings**

Before any analysis of sponsored content messages and journalism can begin, a solid understanding of what St. Louis charter schools are compared to public, and for the purposes of this study, private schools as well. This study will primarily focus on public versus charter, but does seek to help in understanding as it relates to the researcher's findings which does include participants whose children attend public, private and charter schools. Having participation from these three educational options, makes it important to define each before heading into research and conclusions.

**Charter Schools**

Charter schools are defined as, "a tuition-free school of choice that is publicly funded but independently run. They have a sponsoring group/educational institution that can utilize private funding to operate" (Prothero , 2018). They've been around since 1990 when the first charter school opened in Minnesota as a way to "loosen red tape around public schools and free up educators to innovate" (Prothero, 2018). As mentioned earlier in this study, the first two charter schools opened in the St. Louis area during the 2000-2001 school year. But this idea of school choice in the St. Louis area began nearly 30 years prior with the introduction of magnet schools and voluntary transfer programs (Palmer, 2019).

**Public Schools**

Public schools are defined as, "learning institutions that are funded by local, state and/or federal governments. They offer general education opportunities to children in Pre-K through through grade 12, and extracurricular activities are also part of many public school

programs" (https://learn.org/articles/What_are_Public_Schools.html). In the state of Missouri, there are currently over 560 public school districts (DESE, 2018). Each of those districts offer general education to the students who live within their geographic boundaries in addition to special education services for those who require it (Frankenberg et al, 2011).

**Private Schools**

Private schools are defined as, "those that are sponsored by non-government entities. Almost all private schools in the United States have non-profit status. This means that they are exempt from taxes and pursue an educational mission rather than profit" (Sander, 2011). For the 2018-2019 school year, the St. Louis area had close to 200 private schools which included 67-percent of those being religiously affiliated (https://www.privateschoolreview.com/missouri/saint-louis-county).

**Journalism**

Journalism is seen as a cornerstone of a democratic society because it's set up to "…monitor, facilitate and maintain deliberation that is for the public good" (Fenton, 2010). Journalism refers to an organized way of communicating to many in a short amount of time (McQuail, 2010). McQuail and other media scholars note its evolution from newspapers, magazines and radio to today's expansion fueled by technology advances into cable news, blogs, websites and other digital outlets. In fact, so much has changed in terms of mainstream media, the Pew Research Center has changed the way in which it issues its annual report. Beginning in 2004, their annual report identified several important areas of analysis including industry trends, audiences, ownership and economics. The report looked at each of these key areas and identified sweeping

trends across a few key platforms: television, radio and internet. Another key finding specifically in the 2004 report is the understanding and influence of digital news gathering and the decreased turnaround time to report stories, more reliance on technology, syndicated material and synthesizing second-hand material (Pew Research Center, 2004). It's this finding of news outlets relying on second-hand information and reliance on technology that seemed to set the framework for the evolution of SC.

Another area that is important to consider when it comes to journalism, is its place in society. Historically, there have been three branches of government (or estates) in American society-the Executive (President and employees), Legislative (Senate and House of Representatives) and the Judicial (Supreme Court and lower courts) (USA.gov). However, a free press is often described as the fourth branch of the U.S. government by playing an active role in keeping government agencies and those who work for them accountable (Tran, 2016). In addition, when examining the role journalism plays in a democratic society, it's important to note the belief of the information being reported is seen as "the truth" or an objective account of the issue (Tully & Vraga, 2017).

Noting that influence in society is something that has driven the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) to not only put together a Code of Ethics, but revise them to address the changing landscape of journalism today (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Within that Code, they define four key areas as the foundation of ethical journalism. They are:

    1. Seek the Truth and Report It. Essentially this principal says that journalists should

        take responsibility for the accuracy of their work with the understanding that format

and speed is no excuse for inaccuracy. This principal also discusses the importance of providing context and not oversimplifying an issue simply to promote a topic or story.

2. Minimize Harm. The focus of this principal is that everyone involved in a story and the decision making process should be treated with respect. It also touches on the need of the journalist to balance the public's right to know with the harm it may cause an individual or organization.

3. Act Independently. This guiding belief says that above all else, ethical journalism serves the public by avoiding conflicts of interest and by distinguishing news from advertising or any "hybrid that blur the line between the two" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014) and label any such content as sponsored content.

4. Be Accountable and Transparent. This tenet of the Code of Ethics says that journalists should take responsibility for their work and be able to explain why and how stories were covered to their audiences. Additionally, it implores journalists to acknowledge and correct mistakes in reporting as well as expose unethical journalism, including within their own organizations (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

By examining these guiding principals as it relates to journalism as well as their place in society begins to set the framework and understanding of what standards and obligations journalists have compared to SC providers in sharing information related to the charter school movement.

**Sponsored Content**

Sponsored content is defined as, "…material in an online publication which resembles the publication's editorial content but is paid for by an advertiser and intended to promote the

advertiser's product" (Turgeon, 2017). Historically, it's been used by companies to not only drive customer action, but generate new customers and revenue (Lieb, 2012). This curated content is aimed at identifying ways the brand can connect with consumers in a variety of ways (Pophal, 2018). It's generally written by marketers and aims to entertain and inform the reader while also promoting their viewpoint and/or product in a way that appears credible because of the platform it is shared on (Turgeon, 2017). From blog posts to images to videos, there are countless ways SC can connect with their audiences with the intent of having them take some action (Lieb, 2012). It distinguishes itself from marketing and advertising because instead of companies spending money on advertising, they are now creating content using their company's brand and/ or products to tell a story (Cespedes & Heddleston, 2018). By utilizing SC, brands are able to tell their story in a way that connects with their identified audiences, as well as build brand aware-ness, trust and credibility with those readers (Pophal, 2018).

In building off the core of what makes SC useful for businesses is evaluating it in light of today's changing media environment. Beginning in the mid-1990's, advances in communication technology made it easier and more accessible to the general public.  Journalists initially strug-gled to find ways to harness the power of the digital revolution not only into their business and revenue generating models, but with content as well (Chyi, 2013). As these growing pains in newsrooms were evolving, SC began to see the effectiveness of using their brands and their own digital platforms as a way to not only reach their audiences, but establish communities of sup-porters built on trust, credibility and authority (Rotfeld, 2008 & Hunter, et al, 2013). This then allowed brands to begin utilizing that customer base to promote a variety of other products and in some cases, causes that were important to them.

Even as brands began seeing success with SC, there were skeptics who viewed some SC tactics as misleading. One of the most recognizable forms of SC disguised as news appeared in the 1980's with the evolution of the infomercial. Formatted as a news show with a host interviewing the brand's guest expert, critics argued that this new sales tactic was deceiving because it gave the program's viewers an enhanced impression that the show was passing along unbiased information instead of paid advertising (Rotfeld, 2008). Early complaints filed with the Federal Trade Commission primarily focused on deceptive product claims but also charges of using deceptive messaging that misrepresented the infomercial as a regular broadcast or cable program (Wicks, 1994).

This problem of SC posing as unbiased news content when it comes to the charter school conversation was illustrated in an article published in *Forbes* from Rex Sinquefield, a self-proclaimed advocate of school choice and president of the Show Me Institute, a conservative Missouri think-tank dedicated to limited government and charter school expansion. In the article, Sinquefield shares statistics such as 50 teachers resigned in St. Louis Public Schools after the first day and 20 percent of Milwaukee Public Schools started the 2013-2014 school year with new principals. Sinquefield goes on to say that these numbers indicate that change must come in America's public schools and the best way to do that is by expanding school choice and charter schools (Sinquefield, 2013). At the end of the article, readers learn a bit about the author when he writes,

> I am the retired co-founder of Dimensional Fund Advisors. A committed Missouri
>
> philanthropist, I serve as president of the Show Me Institute, a state think-tank for limited
>
> government, and am president and chairman of the Chess Club and Scholastic Center of

Saint Louis (Sinquefield, 2013).

Nowhere in the biography does Sinquefield share that as the president of the Show Me Institute he's not only championed the idea of privatizing education, but poured millions of dollars into weakening Missouri's public school systems (Graves & Fischer, 2014). Had this important disclosure been made, as well as the fact that Sinquefield is not a staff journalist for Forbes and therefore not held to the same accountability practices as journalists, it would've helped in transparency and understanding for the reader.

**Framing the Conversation**

The idea of framing was first introduced by Gregory Bateson in 1972 when he defined it as a "spatial and temporary bounding set of interactive messages" (Bateson, 1972). Since then, framing has been used in several different disciplines including psychology, speech communication, organizational decision making, economics, media studies and political communication (Hallahan, 1999). Framing works to evaluate the ways in which news items and story content are delivered within familiar contexts and has continually shown that the general public not only believes that what the media is bringing to them is true, but that those issues are the most important of the day. Kosicki takes a deeper look at framing by identifying a subset known as as media framing which takes a closer look at the issues, definitions and story selections of the media to gain a better understanding of how stories are chosen and the impact it has on the public conversation (Kosicki, 1993). Goffman talks about the influence of framing on individuals and writes that even though citizens may not be able to pin down the structure or emphasis of the frame, oftentimes it still exists and has an impact on their thinking about the world around them (Goffman, 1974).

**Media Literacy**

A key component that must be evaluated alongside framing is media literacy which helps bring an awareness to how the media works and the relationship that is established between the entity and the audience (Tully & Vraga, 2017).  It's been defined as the ability to analyze, access, evaluate and engage in critical thinking about the vast array of messages people receive and send on a daily basis (Hobbs, 2010). The capabilities of people to make responsible choices about the information they read and the sources with which it comes from in this media-saturated environment has become a key competency that all citizens in a democratic society should have (Hobbs, 2010). In taking this into account, as well as the potential influence of framing in today's information-saturated environment, the purpose of this study looks at whether or not the general public can discern differences between content delivered by journalists versus SC.

**Micro to Macro Viewpoint**

Taking the fundamentals of media framing a step further by looking at some of the most common frames being used to tell the charter school story is imperative. According to scholars, one of the major misconceptions being utilized by SC providers to illustrate the benefits of charter schools is that Americans should continue using a local lens when it comes to evaluating education (Eng, 2016). For instance, scholars say the public believes the purpose of an education is to help individuals develop the tools to succeed (Chart & Kendall-Tyler, 2008) and that students, parents and/or teachers are responsible for those outcomes (Bales, 2010). Due to this micro view of educational success, oftentimes the other contributing factors that fall out of that view are community resources and state legislators (Eng, 2016). By not taking those factors into account, a large piece of framing for the charter school push is missing since those considerations are

needed to create not only an accurate portrayal of the current educational environment, but change at both the micro and macro level as well (Stack, 2007).

This push for the local view of school performance is seen in an article published in the *Kansas City Star* by the Kansas Policy Institute's (KPI) President Dave Trabert in which he calls for smarter education spending practices just as the state's Supreme Court is considering how to best fund public and charter schools (Trabert, 2018). The article not only argues for more accountability at the individual school levels, but shares with readers KPI's suggestions on improving the funding model which also coincides with KPI's mission to,

> "enact public policy solutions that protect the constitutional right to freedom of all
> Kansans, give them greater access to better educational opportunities, and allow them to
> keep more of what they earn" (Kansas Policy Institute).

**Test Scores**

Another frame that is commonly used when talking about the move towards charter schools has to do with test scores as a measure of student and system success. This frame was seen in a *St. Louis Post Dispatch* article talking about how reading test scores for American students hasn't changed in two decades. The article went on to talk about the scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that showed that two-thirds of students in the U.S. scored below the "proficient" levels on reading tests administered in 2017 and that the percentage hasn't changed since 1998. The article went on to share insight from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) highlighting the testing and achievement discrepancies when it comes to evaluating students on the NAEP test compared to the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) (Taketa, 2018). Essentially, the DESE spokesperson said pa-

rameters set by the MAP tests are different than NAEP and therefore can't both be used as indicators of student success. Conversely, when those same test results came out and were reported by The Show-Me Institute (SMI), a very different frame was used. The article's writer, Susan Pendergrass used the NAEP test results as a way to illustrate that charter schools are the obvious answer to these statistics (Pendergrass, 2018). In addition, the article goes on to talk about how the nation's charter schools were making double digit gains but concedes that NAEP results for Missouri charter schools can't be used as a comparison against Missouri public schools because, "charter schools are used as punishment and are relegated to two cities" and therefore it's not possible to create an accurate sample of charter school student success to portray the progress those schools are making (Pendergrass, 2018). Pendergrass takes her evaluation of these results a step further when she appeared on St. Louis radio during *The Marc Cox Show* on FM NewsTalk 97.1. It was during this interview that Pendergrass shared with listeners how charter schools could help close these achievement gaps and provide more opportunity for students (The Marc Cox Show, 2018). This crossover of presenting SC as unbiased news contributes to the misunderstanding of the charter school movement.

The discrepancy between the achievement happening for students enrolled in charter schools compared to their public school peers is also debated among scholars. Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang found an overarching theme that when analysis is done across the country on charter school results, it generally suggests that charter school achievement falls behind public school scores (Frankenberg et al, 2011). Conversely, Frankberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang found when results are reported at the state level the results tended to be more mixed when looking at achievement between charter and public school students (Frankenberg et al, 2011).

However, when test scores of any kind are reported at either the local or national level and the message is conflicting, it also can lead to misinterpretations and understanding of charter schools (Buckley, & Schneider, 2007)

**School Success Measurements**

Another problem that arises when SC pose as unbiased news information on the topic of charter schools are the public's understanding of other indicators of school success. Education scholars would argue that the only thing standardized test scores truly measure is household income since there is a direct connection between income and test scores (Serafini, 2002). Generally, the higher the student's income is, the higher their test scores will be due to access to academic resources not usually available to those at lower income brackets. Even in light of this understanding by educators that test scores are not indicative of student success, SC providers continue to use test scores and other statistics to tell their narrative as it relates to promoting school choice. Stack delves into this misguided frame by saying statistics provide SC a "simplified mechanism of merely reporting reality" which is then weaved into a story with the use of personal stories and/or interviews with experts that lend credibility to those statistics (Stack, 2007). Oftentimes the other contributing factors identified earlier such as income level and access to academic resources are not mentioned in that reporting which gives the reader an inaccurate picture of the problem and the underlying causes of it (Serafini, 2002). This fact, partnered with the one sided SC stories is that when they get disseminated through various media channels and reach different audiences, they contribute to the public's misunderstanding of the charter school movement due to the frames being used.

**Making Sense of It All**

The problem that is brought to the forefront through the examination of framing coverage of the charter school movement is what are American's to do when it comes to deciphering what they are seeing or reading? According to Stray, the burden of presenting a nonpartisan view of a news event is on the journalist (Stray, 2012). By utilizing the hostile media effect as a lens through which to look at this issue of media leanings, he points out that perceived cultural differences are just one of the many reasons readers may think a journalist is focusing on just one aspect of an issue in order to promote their beliefs. Overcoming this bias is hard to combat he admits because we all generally identify with one sect or group in society (Stray, 2012). In order to do that, we generally see life the same way they do and share many beliefs about the world. So when we read an article or text that doesn't share that belief with us and our peer group, we sometimes see it as leaning a certain way or showing bias. One example that many journalists oftentimes hear from readers and/or viewers is that the media is always prone to more liberal viewpoints in coverage of issues facing our society (Stray, 2012).

**Bracing for Impact**

Through the examples presented here it's clear to see that the frames being used by SC providers and journalists carry a lot of weight when it comes to shaping public policy and public opinion on the charter school movement. McQuail touches on the impact the media has because they are seen as a collective source of information. People in general, see the media as a source of information and guidance especially when it comes to issues outside the person's general experience (McQuail, 2010). This in turn has created power and influence for journalists and SC in controlling what people think about as it relates to issues (Guiboa, 2013).

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**The Case for Reform**

The case studies provided share the need for SC providers to be transparent if any substantial change for American students is to come. Some would argue that SC providers shouldn't have to change the way they frame their stories and that as people working on behalf of those organizations, they have the right to cover what issues they think are important for the general public to know and put them in whatever context they see fit. Many journalists would argue that it's up to the reader to discern whether or not what they are reading is biased to one side of the issue or not and to decide whether or not to get their news from that particular source (Walbert, 2015).  The problem that exists here is what Hobbs shared about the influx of messages. With so many different content providers including journalists and SC putting out information, the need for media literacy is now more important than ever as people work to decipher what they read online (Hobbs, 2010).

It's with that understanding, that this study seeks to answer the following question: Primary research question: How do the frames used by both journalists and sponsored content providers help or hinder the general public's understanding of the charter school movement?

# Chapter 3: Method

**Research Materials**

In an effort to understand whether or not frames used by journalists and SC providers help or hinder understanding of the charter school movement, the researcher utilized focus groups. A focus group is a small group of people discussing a topic or issues defined by a researcher. It's generally between six and ten people who sit around a table while the researcher introduces the topic for discussion and then invites and moderates discussion from group members (Cameron, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the researcher served as moderator and facilitated the discussion. This method is the most effective for this study because the interaction amongst the group's participants allowed the researcher to gather insight into their understanding of SC and journalists' news coverage of the charter school movement.

**Research Design**

Before focus groups were conducted, the researcher identified two articles written about the charter school movement. One was written by SC provider, the Show Me Institute and the other one was written by a journalist for the St. Louis Post Dispatch. The St. Louis Post Dispatch was used for this study because it is the major regional newspaper serving St. Louis City and County, St. Charles County as well as the Metro East which consists of several Illinois counties on the east side of the Mississippi River as well as several outlining counties on both sides of the river. It's been around since 1878 and is currently the only daily newspaper in the city of St. Louis. The paper has received 18 Pulitzer Prizes and continues to live by the platform that was established in 1907 by Joseph Pulitzer which says,

…it will always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, al

ways fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose

privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always

remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news,

always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory

plutocracy or predatory poverty (www.stltoday.com).

The Show-Me Institute (SMI) was used as the SC provider because of its reputation as

being not only the leading conservative authority driving the St. Louis charter school movement,

but their ability to penetrate journalistic avenues such as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch with their

messaging (Phelps, 2018). The Show-Me Institute (SMI) describes itself as the "only think tank

in Missouri dedicated to promoting free markets and individual liberty." Their mission and vision

statement goes on to specifically address education and says, "Our vision is for Missouri to be a

place where entrepreneurs are free to pursue their dreams and where parents are free to direct the

education and upbringing of their children". According to their website, the Show-Me Institute

is a charitable organization that gets financial support from individuals, foundations and corpora-

tions who share their vision for the state and want to improve the quality of public debate

(https://showmeinstitute.org/about-show-me-institute). Examples of their media placements can

be seen in several St. Louis publications including the St. Louis Business Journal (Bush & Mur-

phy, 2017) and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Laffer & Sinquefield, 2016). It's this ability of SMI

to inject its narrative and framing into journalistic channels that qualifies this organization as SC

posing as unbiased news. As described earlier in this study, SC is defined as "…material in an

online publication which resembles the publication's editorial content but is paid for by an advertiser and intended to promote the advertiser's product" (Turgeon, 2017).

Once that SC article that talks about charter schools was identified, news coverage of charter schools by a staff journalist at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch was found. By beginning here, it allowed the researcher to set a baseline and content parameters for the study to help identify how the charter school movement has been reported in the St. Louis area by having an example of both. Two key pieces of analysis were done prior to conducting the focus groups. First, the researcher examined the frames that were utilized as well as some insightful similarities and differences that will be explored. Among some of the key similarities between the two articles were that they both shared a negative viewpoint of public schools and their performance. By both writers also utilizing data such as test scores and proposed legislation in their writing, the authors of each added weight and credibility to the stories. Some of the key differences included the staff journalist using direct quotes from educational experts and the SC author using more emotionally charged words and phrases. As discussed earlier in this study, the SC article focused on micro components of the charter school movement such as encouraging readers to consider the local advantages of having more educational choices for students whereas the St. Louis Post-Dispatch writer put test score data in perspective with state and national numbers.

The second key component that was concluded by the researcher prior to beginning the focus group portion of this study was to removed the headlines, bylines, website URL and all additional supplementary information provided on the page about the origin of both articles as a way to not inherently bias the reader one way or another since headline writing plays a central

role in shaping story presentation (Hagar & Diakopoulous, 2019). By withholding the headline and byline, the researcher removed that potential trigger that could have caused participants to draw premature conclusions about the article and its contents prior to reading it for themselves. In addition, by removing the name of the authors and all supplementary information including how each story was presented on the page, it allowed the researcher to isolate the study and simply focus on the words and frames that were used instead of taking the chance that participants may recognize an authors name or draw on other information not related to the study. For illustrative purposes, some of the key components of the supplementary information that was removed included a designation of the SC example as an op-ed or opinion editorial. What is important to note about this intentional omission by the researcher is that in this digital age of information, oftentimes readers are no longer looking at a hard copy of a newspaper but instead are linked to articles based on a search of key terms or related articles. By removing this designation for the participants, the researcher removed that visual cue in an effort to isolate the variables in this study.

**Procedure**

The researcher first utilized Facebook to identify eligible parents for this research study. In total, the researcher was able to recruit 24 participants who had current students ages 3-18 and lived in the St. Louis area.  There were 10 men and 14 women. Efforts were made to get insights from parents at both public, private and charter schools in the St. Louis area (see Table A-1). By the researcher casting a wide net utilizing Facebook for recruitment efforts, this balance was struck by having 10 parents who self identified as having students in either private or charter schools with the remaining 14 participants having self identified as having students attend public

schools. Having that diversity of school choice represented allowed the researcher to gather insight from several perspectives. The only people who were excluded from this study are those who weren't able to speak and/or read English fluently because the articles in this study were written in English and focus groups were conducted in English. By structuring the focus groups in this way, it allowed the researcher to understand how the framing of stories by both journalists and SC providers helped or hindered understanding of the charter school movement.

In the public Facebook post, the researcher asked her social network to share the brief summary about the purpose of the study and then requested for them to contact the researcher via Facebook direct message or email in order to connect with those willing to participate. Of those 24 individuals, the focus groups were then divided into four groups depending on a few key factors including: the participants' availability, weather and access to childcare. The groups were fairly heterogeneous in terms of gender and school choice with the majority of participants being white females, white males and one African American female. The decision to keep these groups heterogeneous coincided with best practices that say in doing so, the researcher removes bias and keeps with the intent of the study which was not to infer but rather understand (Krueger & Casey, 2014) if the use of sponsored content and mainstream media coverage helped or hindered understanding of the charter school movement.

The focus groups were conducted in February 2019 in the St. Louis area with each of them lasting 45 minutes to an hour. Two of them were conducted at the Cliff Cave branch of the St. Louis Library, with the other two taking place at the researcher's place of employment and a participants' home. Winter weather did play a role in who made up two of the four focus groups.

Four female participants who had previously agreed to be a part of the research study, backed out as a result of winter weather forecasts and concern for their safety. Other than that instance, all participants who agreed to be a part of this research study were able to attend. All of the focus groups were videotaped with the researcher taking notes as well as transcribing each session using the constant comparative method. The benefit of using the constant comparative method with which to analyze the findings is that it allowed the researcher to break the data down into specific categories that are relevant to this study's area of focus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From there, the responses and conclusions that will be discussed further in this study were grouped into five categories based on the research questions. Specific comments that are highlighted are not meant to necessarily be indicative of how the group thought about a particular topic but rather to demonstrate insight that was gleaned by the researcher on this specific area of study. When those comments are included from specific participants, they will be denoted using acronyms such as AAF for African-American female, WF for White females and WM for White males followed by a number that was assigned to them when they elected to participate in the focus group.

Prior to the start of each focus group, the researcher did a few preliminary actions to help ensure consistency and uniformity among the focus groups. First, the researcher ensured the two articles used for this study were turned over on the table so that participants couldn't read them in advance. Additionally, each article was designated as article one and article two as a way to ensure clarity for participants as they responded to answers since headlines and other identifying information was removed. To aid in understanding the results, article one was the story written by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch writer and article two was written by the SC author. Once those preliminary actions were taken, the researcher welcomed participants into the room and facilitat-

ed an icebreaker activity by asking each of the participants to share their name, how many children they have and their ages. By beginning the focus groups this way, it allowed the participants to have a basic understanding as to why they were all there and understand that they all shared a common motivation for wanting to participate in this research; their children. From there, the following open-ended questions were asked:

1. Before reading the articles, what is your opinion on the charter school movement in St. Louis?

2. After reading the articles, are there differences between the two?

3. What differences do you notice?

4. If no differences are noted, what is the focus of both articles?

5. Identify words that stand out in both of the articles.

6. Why do they stand out?

7. Describe what meaning those words have to you.

8. Identify how those words influence your understanding of the charter school

movement in the St. Louis area?

9. Would you share this article with a friend?

10. Describe why or why not?

By asking these questions in this order, the researcher had the opportunity to not only understand participants' initial thoughts on the charter school movement but allow group members to share their thoughts about how the readings helped or hindered their understanding of the charter school movement. One of the key takeaways from this series of questioning was that the researcher was able to gain initial understanding of what participants knew or thought of charter schools versus after reading the two articles. By working from that initial point of understanding, helped participants and the researcher ensure a level playing field as the focus group was conducted.

**Why This was the Best Method**

A qualitative approach was the best way for the researcher to gain a better understanding of how media frames by both SC and journalists impact understanding. By asking semi-structured questions in a focus group setting, the researcher was able to observe and note the group dynamic and discussion points that developed as a result of the topic and corresponding questions. As the questions began to ask participants to specifically pinpoint words and phrases and their meanings to them, the focus group method allowed the researcher to observe how many participants took into account other responses before adding their insight into the discussion. This development within the focus groups added depth to the research and results by allowing participants the freedom to express their opinions in an open environment.

**How the Method and Data will Relate to the Media Framing Theory**

There have been several studies and scholarly articles written on the impact of framing on public perception of public and private education, but none address how frames used by SC and

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journalists help or hinder understanding of the charter school movement. As discussed earlier, one of the key points of SC when it comes to the charter school movement is it generally focuses on the micro level of understanding compared to macro. Just as Stack's study found that when a writer chooses words and phrases like 'failure of students' instead of focusing on the failure of the entire system, it hinders understanding of education as a whole (Stack, 2007). Where current research ends is where this study picks up by building on those studies and utilizing current examples of SC and journalism to help illustrate the issues that arise when readers are inundated with information. By taking into account the influence media framing can have on audiences, this body of research builds on that by working to identify specific words and phrases used in each article as well as insights from participants on what they'd like to see included in articles shared online to help aid their understanding of the charter school movement.

# Chapter 4: Results

In evaluating the findings of this study, five main categories were identified by the researcher on the use of sponsored content and mainstream media coverage and its role in helping or hindering understanding of the charter school movement. Identifying themes as well as sub themes with words and phrases, helped the researcher identify how the groups reacted to the questions and how those will help the researcher determine conclusions (Marczak & Sewell, 2005) By organizing the research this way and looking through the framing analysis lens, the researcher can more closely evaluate and compare whether or not SC versus journalists coverage of the charter school movement helps or hinders understanding. From there, each of those five categories will be explored in this section and are based on the research questions outlined earlier in this study.

*1. Initial understanding of the charter school movement.*

An important starting point for this research was to first hear from participants about their initial understanding of the charter school movement. As mentioned earlier, 14 participants self identified as having students at public schools with the other 10 identifying themselves as sending their children to charter or private schools. This information is essential in understanding the insight gained with this question. The ranges in answers to this initial question ran the gamut of understanding with some saying they knew nothing about the charter school movement (WM8) to others who supported charter schools because they felt it allowed for customizable education for students that wasn't available in a public school setting (WF6). Oftentimes, this initial question lead many participants to talk about stories they had read or seen about charter schools and

alternative educational opportunities for children. Some participants linked this discussion to the hiring and skills gap many trades are experiencing as a result of schools encouraging students to attend college instead of a trade school. Whereas other participants drew from this conversation news articles they recalled from eight to 10 years ago recounting fraud in charter schools and how many in the St. Louis area had to close their doors because of either financial or academic reasons with WF4 stating,

"what I know about charter schools is what I've heard from my neighbor who switched her son from a public school to a charter school because he was having problems at the public school. She said they didn't know how to handle him and his behavior. He was getting in trouble a lot, so she moved him to a charter school. I haven't talked to her about it in awhile, but I'm guessing she's still happy with that decision because I think he's still there."

This insight of a participant to draw a conclusion about the current state of charter schools based on something they read, saw or experienced several years ago aligns with what Eng and Stack both pointed out about people making judgements about education based on the frames used in the media stories they read or saw (Eng, 2016 & Stack, 2007).

As this discussion continued among participants, another common thread that kept emerging across the focus groups was this idea of local control of education and the need for neighborhood schools. This discussion came about as participants began talking about what brought about the emergence of charter schools and how they, as well as public schools are fund-ed. Several participants noted the advantages of having local schools because they contribute to

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the local economy by keeping people in their neighborhoods, shopping locally, etc instead of having to drive their children out of the area for educational opportunities such as charter schools. WM9 shared,

> " I'm not against charter schools but what I'd really like to see is the return of neighbor hood schools. I live on the Illinois side and my son attended a local private school. We liked it because it was in our neighborhood and gave us the opportunity to connect more with our neighbors. I don't think that's the case now since there are lots of school options all over now."

Participants also drew the connection between property values and local schools with one participant noting the decline in property values with the loss of accreditation of the now Normandy Schools Collaborative since the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education had to intervene since test scores were so low (AAF1). One of the participants shared,

> "Seeing Normandy go down like it did was a shame. Why did no one intervene or do something before it lost its accreditation and disrupted all those kids' lives. The fact those kids had to either stay in a bad school or commute an hour one way was shameful, just shameful all around" (AAF1).

As this discussion began to wrap up, the one point all participants agreed on was the idea that parents have to be the ones who decide what is best for their child and as such, should have the right to choose what educational opportunity is best for their child.

The next step in this focus group drew on the researcher to ask the participants to take 10 to 15 minutes to read the two articles that were provided for them. As mentioned earlier, the researcher chose to remove the headlines of each article so as not to prematurely influence participants about the context of the articles before them. The article written by a staff journalist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch was marked as "Article 1" (A1) and the article written by SMI was marked as "Article 2" (A2). Once each participant finished the two articles, the researcher continued the questions and discussions.

2. *Differences between the two articles.*

This next line of discussion focused on trying to gain insight from the participants on whether or not they noticed any differences between the two articles and then asking them to talk about what those differences were. Each of the four focus groups agreed that the articles were different in one basic way; A1 was fact-based whereas A2 was more opinion based. When asked by the researcher to elaborate on this, many in the groups identified that A2 was more positive toward the charter school movement and A1 focused on testing. One participant went on to note that A2, "feels like an op-ed or blog because it pulls on the heartstrings and tries to be as persuasive as possible with no real facts to back up their claims" (WF12). Additionally, another participant noted, "this reads like something written by (former Governor) Greitans and his staff because of how heavily invested he was in seeing charter schools expand" (WF10). Stack noted that for many SC providers, focusing on the micro issues such as test scores instead of looking at the whole system is a clear indicator of SC (Stack, 2007). This comment was met with others in the group who felt that both articles were a bit of propaganda because some participants felt like A1 also had an agenda to push which was that of public school failures in the St. Louis area. The

importance of framing as noted by participants coincides with what Kosicki and Goffman talk about when referring to the media frames that are used in that it helps the reader establish what issues are most important at the time and help them make decisions about the world around them (Kosicki, 1993 & Goffman, 1974). This discussion ended when WF5 noted that, "regardless which way people feel on charter schools, these articles would confirm those thoughts". WF5 went on to say if you were in favor of charter school expansion, you would like A2 whereas if you were in favor or public schools, you would like A1. Tully & Vraga confirm this idea of people being predisposed to the media and messaging that best fits with their belief system (Tully & Vraga, 2017).

3. *Words, phrases and their meanings.*

RQ4 and RQ5 paired well together as the researcher began to dive deeper into the specific words and phrases that were used to help participants' draw their conclusions on the differences of the articles. When referring to A1, several participants pointed out the first sentence of the article which was, "There's a wide discrepancy in the percentage of students whom Missouri considers academically proficient and the number of Missouri students considered proficient nationally" as a frame with which the entire article was written and also lead them to the belief that the article was going to be negative on public schools. Participants continued to draw on quotes such as, "'We set the bar at different levels. Missouri's could be considered to be set a little lower," said Jeremy Ellis, NAEP coordinator for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.'" WF6 noted after pointing out this quote that it again reinforces that A1 has a negative agenda of public school failure to promote since the majority of the article focuses around test scores and Missouri public schools coming up short. This observation by the partici-

pants align with what Stray talks about when touching on the perceived differences between the writer and audience which may lead some to believe that a journalist is focusing on one aspect of an issue instead of giving a whole picture (Stray, 2012) with WF5 saying,

> "Where are they getting the facts for this article? They talk about these 'random samples' of students, but that is never defined anywhere in this article. How am I supposed to know and believe this when it isn't noted anywhere. This makes me question how accurate this really is when their sources are mentioned anywhere".

In addition, this mention of participants to draw conclusions based on quotes provided in the article pairs with what Hobbs talks about when discussing the importance of media literacy among the general public. The ability to analyze, access, evaluate and engage with the multitude of content put before people is essential in today's media saturated environment (Hobbs, 2010).

In moving the discussion onto the words and phrases in A2 that helped them draw their conclusions, many participants once again pointed out the first sentence in the article which was, "Put yourself in the shoes of a parent whose child is not learning in his or her assigned school." This sentence, participants agreed helped set the tone for the article and lead them to believe this one was going to pull at the reader's emotions. Additionally, WF4 talked about how this sentence and the ones following lead her to believe that the writer wanted the reader to feel as though the only way they could be good parents was to consider charter schools for their children and grandchildren by sharing, "why is it worded this way? I mean I consider myself a fairly good role model and parent to my child. Aren't there enough pressures on parents now and to add this in doesn't seem fair". This was a sentiment echoed by participants who felt that the tone in which

A2 was written was meant to spark emotion and action. In that same discussion, many participants drew out the words "gap" and "measuring up" as a way to aid the reader in understanding the disparities that currently exist.

*4. Understanding of charter school movement.*

Identifying understanding based on these two articles was the next objective of the focus group. In this question, the researcher asked participants to communicate how the words used in the articles provided helped influence their understanding of the charter school movement. In several of the focus groups, this question lead to other questions posed by participants about things like how charter schools are formed, funded and evaluated. Whenever this discussion came up, the researcher allowed the group to work through these questions to see if anyone knew specifics about each of the inquiries. WF7 who works for a public school district in the St. Louis area added to the discussion that she believed charter schools are funded using taxpayer dollars and take money from local public schools and added, "charter schools don't have any of the same requirements or obligations public schools do. We have to take all children, not just those who get chosen in a lottery. It creates an unfair playing field". This comment then sparked a debate between WM9 and WF1about the services both provide for students. WM9 shared with the group earlier in the discussion that he strongly believes that neighborhood schools should return so that tax money could return to the area. WF1, who works at a charter school and sends her child to a charter school added that if the neighborhood school model were to return, it would hurt the thousands of students who go there for support because local public schools can't handle all the students in their care as well as provide some of the individualized attention they deserve and are getting at charter schools sharing, "Understand that if charter schools were to close up,

what would happen to those students? Where would they go? They are now getting opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have. We are providing that for them and without us, they would suffer". It was at this point in the conversation that the researcher pulled the groups back together to focus on how the words used helped influence their understanding of the charter school movement. WF5 shared that A1 didn't make like comparisons in their analyzing of test scores saying that the author did not,

> "compare apples to apples because of the quotes used that say some of the test data doesn't measure the same things. They shouldn't be writing about test scores from one test and then comparing it to test data from another set of tests that measure something else because it's confusing for the reader" (WF5).

This observation by WF5 builds off what McQuail discusses as the role media outlets have in our society as being collective sources of information. Readers have come to expect that what they read is not only an accurate portrayal of the issue but truthful as well (McQuail, 2018). It was also during this discussion that many participants shared personal stories of friends who had to pull their children out of public schools because of a variety of factors including bullying, class sizes and not meeting the needs of the child. This point lead others to not only chime in on the negatives and positives of public versus private versus charter schools, but also on the fact that for many people reading these two articles, many of them would just believe it because it is printed (WF5). This sentiment echoes what Kosicki and Goffman talked about when it comes to media framing and the influence it has on readers in helping them decipher the important issues facing them in the world in which they live (Kosicki, 1993 & Goffman, 1974). It also touches on

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what Davison discusses when sharing the idea of the third-person effect hypothesis which says that people "overestimate the influence that mass communication have on the attitudes and behavior of others and more spefically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to persuasive communication" (Davison, 1983).

*5. Content sharing.*

In this section of the focus group, the researcher wanted to find out from participants if they would share either of the articles before them. This question allowed the focus group participants to reflect on all that had been discussed thus far and then make a decision on whether or not they would share the content included in these articles. By a quick show of hands, the researcher asked participants to raise their hands if they would share A1. Out of the 24 participants, 13 of them said they would share it. For A2, 15 participants said they would share it, with a few people saying they would share both articles. After this quick show of hands, the researcher asked participants to explain why or why not they would share the articles. WF14 said, "yeah I'd share both articles because I think they share different information that people need to know. One shares facts about test scores and one shares legislation that people need to know about". Right after WF14 shared that observation, WF6, who teaches at a public school but sends her child to a charter school added,

> "one of the major problems of A2 is that it mentions a Senate Bill that is interpreted
>
> wrong here. According to our teacher's union, what the writer is sharing here is the wrong
>
> way to look at this bill. It's completely wrong. What we (teachers) are being told is that
>
> this bill would strip more money and resources from our classroom and give them to

charter schools. There is no way that is good for us or the students we teach. I really hope people don't believe this because it's one person's interpretation and it's wrong."

One of the common threads that was shared across focus group sessions was that A2 shared solutions or calls to action for the reader. Participants seemed to like that they were given specific actions they could take if they felt the same way the writer did in A2. WM3 said, "you know, what I would like to see is a combination of the two articles, really combining parts of what is in A1 and A2. In A2 they tell us how we as parents can make a difference and I like that". WF5 added to that thought by sharing,

"yeah I would've liked to have seen a mix of the factual information in A1 along with the call to actions in A2 to help me feel like I was getting the full picture of the issue. Currently, I feel like I'm getting bits and pieces and if I didn't read these two articles together, I'd be missing part of the story".

These comments sparked several head nods from participants saying that it's hard when reading articles now to know whether or not the writer is giving the full picture of the issue or just touching on a portion they want you to know about. Walbert and Hobbs both talk about this problem facing today's media audiences. They are constantly receiving messages about a variety of issues and then have to work to decipher them in a way that fits into their everyday life (Walbert, 2015 & Hobbs, 2010).

**Solutions-Based Journalism**

These comments delve into solutions-based journalism which focuses more on the how and why of a successful or failed issue, instead of just what is working and what isn't (Curry & Hammonds, 2014). In Curry and Hammonds study, they presented over 700 participants with six articles. Some were solutions-based while others would be considered strictly fact or problem based. Some of the findings of their study of the solutions-based stories included readers sharing:

- The article seemed different in some way from what they were used to reading.

- Participants felt they knew more about the article than other articles they were asked to read.

- Participants indicted that the article increased their interest in the issue.

These findings, along with the research provided in this study show an emerging interest in this type of journalism.

# Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

**Findings**

By taking a closer look at how the charter school movement is being written about by journalists and SC providers, the researcher identified several key factors that influence people's understanding of the charter school movement. **The first is a general decline in trust or skepticism in the messages they receive.** This finding is one of the most significant to come out of this study because of the overarching implications it has for not only journalists but educators as well. As the Pew Research Center pointed out in their most recent research, trust in entities structured to provide services for the greater public have taken a hit when it comes to public perception (Pew Research Center, 2017). What so oftentimes happens is once the public looses trust in one area of government or one sect of the media, they generally lose trust in all the others as well (Rossmeier et al, 2015). The challenges this sort of trickle down effect can have on entities such as public education can be damaging not just in the short term, but long term as well. As was shown during the course of this study, the researcher heard from participants that their view of the charter school movement in the St. Louis area was oftentimes based on news stories or personal stories they heard from friends and family. If an acquaintance had a good experience with charter schools, then participants were quick to share and the reverse was true as well. This finding coincides with what Stray and other scholars have noted about people identifying with one sect or group and generally sticking to those beliefs (Stray, 2012).

**Another finding that advances the research when it comes to sponsored content and its impact on public perception is that it's driving action or a change in thought when it**

**comes to the charter school movement in St. Louis.** This discovery was seen throughout the focus groups. By organizing each group by first taking stock of what participants' initial knowledge of the charter school movement was before having them read the sponsored content article as well as the one written by a St. Louis Post-Dispatch staff writer, enabled the researcher to set a solid base of understanding and then building off of that. Several participants initially said they had no real knowledge or understanding of the charter school movement in St. Louis and had never even considered a charter school for their school age child. However, after reading the two articles, several of them noted they felt more informed on the issue and would really have to think about whether or not their local public school was really the best option for their child. This change in perception or understanding of the charter school movement is one of the main tenets of sponsored content because of its ability to persuade an audience (Turgeon, 2017) and cause people to take action in a desirable way to the SC provider (Lieb, 2012). This finding is one that builds on existing research that shows the power and influence behind the words and phrases SC providers use. In other words, in the case of the charter school movement, it's making a difference when it comes to changing minds.

Information overload and its impact on understanding of the charter school movement. Many participants in the focus groups agreed that they are bombarded with messages everyday. Whether it be through radio, television, internet, social media or any number of different communication methods, participants felt as though they were constantly being hit with information. Whether or not the message resonated with them they said all depended on how the information was delivered. Participants said if the information coincided with their personal beliefs, they generally would take the time to read, listen or watch the message. This sentiment is

echoed in what Guiboa talks about when he writes about people finding messages that match their existing beliefs (Guiboa, 2013).

**Significance**

Even though the opinions expressed in this focus group are not all encompassing, it does provide a snapshot into the thoughts of those parents with school-aged children consuming media in the St. Louis area. By looking at the language and frames that were used in both articles, it's clear to see that even though participants could distinguish between fact and opinion, several agreed that they'd like to see more solutions or calls to action included in the media they consume. Some of the impacts that has on an audience can be seen in Curry and Hammonds study into solutions-based journalism as well.

When it comes to answering the question about whether or not the articles provided helped or hindered their understanding of the charter school movement, the answers of participants were mixed. In some occasions, participants felt like they learned more about it, whereas others said the articles sparked more questions than answers about the information they were given and were unclear if what they were reading was the full picture of the issue at hand. However, many participants agreed that even though the two articles sparked more questions for them, they agreed that most readers would share the content without getting those questions answered and that in turn, could continue the spread of misinformation when it comes to understanding the charter school movement.  This idea echoes what Davison talked about in his study of the third-person effect that participants felt they'd be able to discern between opinion and fact-based journalism and that "other" people though, wouldn't be able to make that distinction.

The information gathered here would be helpful to public school districts across Missouri as they work to educate their communities about what is happening not only in their district, but education as a whole. By working from this initial body of research, school officials would be able to either rethink their communication strategies or reinforce them now and in the future. Some initial strategic actions for school districts could include:

- Communicating more openly with not only families of students, but all community constituents on a regular basis. Consistency, honesty and clarity are key here in all communication efforts.

- Understanding and appreciating those families who don't have children that attend public schools still play a role in helping tell the district's story. By engaging them in communication efforts, school leaders allow all facets of a community to help move the school district forward, even if they don't have students attending.

- Working from a very basic level of understanding when communicating information. For example, when communicating complex topics such as test scores and bond issue information, work from the very basic level of understanding. Many constituents won't know and/or be able to quickly get up to speed on the complexities of how test scores or bond issue monies are allocated. By beginning with a very basic, perhaps high-level overview early on, will help get constituents comfortable with the topic before providing them with more detail-oriented communication.

- Providing solutions to all interested parties on issues. As was seen in the findings of this study and others, audiences now are looking for solutions to problems being presented to them. Educators have the unique opportunity to do that for their community. If done in an honest and forthcoming way, it could help not only advance their priorities, but the community as a whole.

Educators aren't the only ones who would benefit from these findings. This body of research could also help journalists and SC providers understand their role in helping or hindering understanding of not only the charter school movement, but other issues as well. Some initial strategic actions for journalists and SC providers could include:

- Thinking about the frames, words and phrases being used in their stories to make sure they are accurate and fair.

- Working from a very basic level of understanding when communicating information. As indicated in the above example about sharing information with readers about test scores or bond issue information, beginning with a very basic, perhaps high-level overview early on, will help get readers comfortable with the topic before providing them with more detail-oriented stories.

- Providing solutions on the stories they write. As was seen in the findings of this study and others, audiences now are looking for solutions to problems being presented to them. By looking for and providing those to readers, could help audiences feel more informed on the issue.

**Limitations**

Since this study used both framing and focus groups, it's important to understand the limitations of focus groups including the inability to control the groups and/or dynamics. Since these groups were compiled of people of different ages, sex, education levels and school choices for their children, there were disagreements in the groups when discussing charter schools (Marczak & Sewell, 2005). Additionally, the majority of participants were white and sent their children to public school districts. Had the researcher perhaps been able to diversify that by having participants who had school-aged children in more charter and private schools, the results may have been different. The same is true for having a more racially diverse group of participants. As noted above, there was only one African American female participant. With more time for research, the results could have been different if participants of different racial backgrounds were included.

Some of the differences noted above are also what made the discussions more insightful, since it gave participants an opportunity to hear how those who are different than them and made different educational decisions for their children feel about charter schools and the educational choices facing parents today. WM5 noted in the last discussion question that prior to this focus group he had never considered another educational choice for his kids since he and his wife were both products of public education. But he went on to say that through this focus group, he had a lot to think about because when he heard others share their experiences and expertise when it comes to school choice, it had him wondering if what he grew up believing is truly the best option for his children.

**Future Research**

This study leaves plenty of room for future research. It would be beneficial to expand the focus groups to include educators, journalists, SC providers and lawmakers to see how SC coverage versus journalists coverage of charter schools helps or hinders understanding of the charter school movement. That information then in turn, could be shared with school leaders and lawmakers to help them understand not only the short-term impact of their decisions as it relates to public education, but the long-term ramifications as well. In addition, expanding this study to include different cities and regions of the country would help understand the wider impact both journalists and SC play in helping or hindering understanding of the charter school movement.

Another direction future research could head into is using the information collected in this study and applying it to the challenges educators and lawmakers continue to face when it comes to validating information on social media channels and online. As witnessed in the 2016 Presidential election as well as other less visible elections and issues, social media is becoming a strong force in not only communicating with people, but shaping public perception (Perez, 2017). Understanding that not only do public entities need to continue to be transparent with their decision-making and communication, but how that information can be transformed into inaccurate information and turned against them will be vital in the coming years. The research gathered in this study can help shape that endeavor as SC providers and journalists continue using online mediums to grow their audience and impact. All of these future research opportunities

illustrate the importance of continuing media literacy education in our society. By educating

people to think critically about the sources of information, as well as information itself they are

receiving, will help the awareness grow about the need to be conscious of the information we

consume and share with others.

# Appendix

*Table A-1*

*Focus Group Participants by gender and race*

| Gender of participants | White | African American |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Men | 10 | |
| Women | 13 | 1 |

*Table A-2*

*Focus Group Participants by gender and school choice for child(s)*

| Gender of participants | Charter | Private | Public |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Men | | 2 | 4 |
| Women | 3 | 6 | 5 |

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