



## *Education, Democracy, and Propaganda: An Epistemological Crisis*

---

*Sonja Varbelow, Angelo State University  
William Yaworsky, University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley*

### **Abstract**

*This article explores the causes of the epistemological crisis that gave rise to conspiracy theories which culminated in large swathes of the U.S. population refusing to accept the outcome of a democratic election. An epistemological crisis is defined by a blurring of facts and falsehoods to the degree that blatant and obvious propaganda holds sway over large segments of the population, resulting in truth decay. We provide an analysis of the propaganda themes collected and identified by the Computational Propaganda Project from April through July of 2020 that demonstrate their prevalence in American social media platforms. We then show how education may limit propaganda's deleterious effects. We approach our research in an interdisciplinary way from the fields of education and cultural anthropology and so contribute an angle to the current conversations about education in a democratic society that has not been the primary focus of educational thought.*

**Keywords:** *epistemology, propaganda, education, democracy*

**T**his article explores the causes of the epistemological crisis that gave rise to conspiracy theories which culminated in large swathes of the U.S. population refusing to accept the outcome of a democratic election. An epistemological crisis is defined by a blurring of facts and falsehoods to the degree that blatant and obvious propaganda holds sway over large segments of the population, resulting in truth decay. It is reflected in a corrosively divided society in which groups view other groups with alarming levels of hostility. This phenomenon gives rise to two basic questions for educators: 1. How did we get to a point where propaganda is more influential than science and objective facts? 2. What is our role in making sure that this country has the educated citizenry that is arguably a fundamental prerequisite for a multicultural democracy? The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the role education can play in counteracting the effects of widespread and systematic propaganda on society and democracy.

We define propaganda as deliberately false or misleading information designed to further the interests of its sponsors. This propaganda is so successful that it is able to create intense and destructive social divisions, controversy, and cultural warfare in arenas such as health care and democratic governance itself. We provide an analysis of the propaganda themes collected and identified by the Computational Propaganda Project (CPP) (Programme on Democracy and Policy, 2020) from April through July of 2020 as an example for how the pandemic is used as a divisive political tool. The CPP compares and contrasts the influence of junk news websites and better

vettted sources of information. It defines junk news websites as those containing at least three of the following five properties: (1) lack of professional standards, (2) use of emotionally-driven language, (3) reliance on false information and conspiracy theories, (4) high bias/hyper-partisanship, and (5) counterfeiting techniques. The themes are dissected using the same procedures used by U.S. Army psychological operations (PSYOP) troops when they evaluate foreign propaganda. We augment this by “retro-engineering” the target audience analysis likely undertaken by state-sponsored propagandists, again basing our methodology on known U.S. Army PSYOP practices.

We position our thinking about education in our own lived experiences in that both authors taught our first classes in the 1990s and currently serve as faculty members in teacher education and anthropology at public U.S. universities. Our understanding of propaganda is likewise based on our life experiences. The lead author grew up in socialist East Germany, a society notably stripped of press and academic freedoms, an environment of almost continuous propaganda. The second author served as an enlisted soldier in the U.S. Army’s 1<sup>st</sup> Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne) conducting armed propaganda, target analysis, propaganda development, and strategic studies directed at audiences in 1980s Latin America. Much of this work involved finding the vulnerabilities, whether emotional, financial, or other, in target audiences and individuals that could render them susceptible to sophisticated propaganda specifically designed to alter their behavior in a manner that furthered U.S. objectives. Hence, between us, we have considerable experience in the roles of propagandized, propagandist, and educator.

The article begins by outlining the problem, which is the epistemological crisis caused by the widespread, systematic deployment of propaganda. We then provide data to show how propaganda is used by powerful interest groups and how this affects democracy. We conclude with insights into how education may limit propaganda’s deleterious effects. This way, we hope to contribute an angle to the current conversations about education in a democratic society that has not been the primary focus of educational thought.

### **Constructionism and Characteristics of an Epistemological Crisis**

*If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what’s true from what’s false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn’t work. And by definition our democracy doesn’t work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis.*  
(Obama, B. in Lerer, 2020)

### **Constructionist Epistemology**

In simplest terms, epistemology is the branch of philosophy that explores how we know, what is real, what is truth. Our lead author’s perspectives are firmly grounded in constructionism; our second author subscribes to Popperian critical rationalism when considering scientific methodology and to constructive empiricism when evaluating the aim of science.<sup>1</sup> As education is focused on individual human beings schooled in a state educational complex, constructionism, which

---

1. We attribute the stark differences in our approaches to epistemology and ontology to our fundamentally different upbringing. The lead author grew up in a classless society. While there were no hegemonic relationships, a common joke was that some people were “equaler” (the comparative of this adjective exists in neither language and is meant to highlight the absurdity of the concept of equal-ness under the circumstances). “Equaler” were, expectedly,

is situated in the interpretivist paradigm, has a prominent role in our analysis. This does not fit neatly into the realism/anti-realism spectrum above and is often rejected by scientists as a hardcore type of anti-realism. We want to point out that realism and constructionism are not comparable because their foci are fundamentally different: While realism is aimed at knowing external phenomena objectively, constructionism is focused on the *meaning* of these phenomena for individual human beings. This does not give anyone the liberty to discard the laws of physics or accept blatantly false propaganda as truths. A constructionist approach explores why people might fall victim to these techniques so as to understand how to prevent them from doing so, which is the purpose of our paper.

Constructionism focuses on the idea that people construct their own meanings (Crotty, 2004). In this view, ontology and epistemology are closely intertwined since the former is approached as “the way one understands the nature of a person’s reality based on multiple social interactions” (Crotty, 2004, p. 43). People create their reality when they interact with other people. These interactions take place in social situations. The way human beings make sense of their experiences evolves from these interactions and situations.

The basis for one’s meaning-making process is the way human beings interpret their interactions with others. Crotty (2004) claimed that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 43 f.). Therefore, meaning is neither objective, since it does not exist outside the human mind, nor subjective because it is not created by the mind and then superimposed upon an outside reality. People construct meaning as they engage with the world and make sense of it. Crotty’s claims give rise to the question of whether there is a reality as such, e.g., one truth, or if reality is the result of individual perception and therefore existent in multiple truths. The natural and the social sciences approach this question from different vantage points: The former are nomothetic (concerned with laws and consistencies) whereas the latter are ideographic (concerned with the individual case) (Crotty, 2004).

If reality is approached ideographically, one might wonder if accepting propagandistic messages might just be one way of meaning-making. This is a fallacy, though, because propaganda designs messages with the goal to confuse or mislead a targeted audience. For example, a common propaganda technique is gaslighting. If I turned off the stove, and you turned it back on accusing me of having forgotten to turn it off, your intended goal is probably to make me doubt myself and my reality. This is not constructionism because what you present as reality is based on a premeditated lie with the intent to mislead and confuse me. What prevents me from a personal epistemological crisis is to think critically about what transpired, that is by looking at other possible explanations for why the stove is on. In doing so I design theories to test the data while the theory you offered is designed to fit the data.

---

those with more power, whereas power came from connections rather than from financial wealth. One was the connection to the governing SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), whose membership made commodities like a telephone possible. The other connection was through West German relatives who had access to “exotic” produce like bananas and oranges. Amidst the silencing of any thought not directly supportive of the socialist system, our lead author approaches questions about truth and reality from the perspective of what things *mean* rather than what they *are*.

By contrast, our second author grew up in Canada and Utah as the son of a successful physician. Safely settled in the upper middle class, the concept of meritocracy worked effectively during his upbringing. His father’s training in the medical sciences served as a primer, a role model for prioritizing rationalism.

While questioning what seems obvious at first glance is the way to prevent me from insanity, it is cumbersome and can easily turn into a slippery slope. If people do not question messages and their sources, they become “excellent sheep” (Deresiewicz, 2014) making decisions based solely on long-held assumptions. If they question reality ad nauseum, they slide into conspiratorial thinking. The purpose of questioning should be to design theories that are empirically adequate. It is precisely this kind of complex thinking that must be taught in schools so it becomes a habit as we will show in the third section of this paper.

### **Characteristics of an Epistemological Crisis**

If reality and truth become indiscernible from falsehoods not only in the unobservable, but in the observable, we are confronted with an epistemological crisis not unlike a person who is ill with schizophrenia, but on a mass scale. This has potentially profound effects on human relationships and on how society functions as a whole.

Four major trends of truth decay have made this dangerous decline in our ability to distinguish fact from falsehood possible: increasing disagreement about facts, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, the resulting increasing influence of propaganda over fact, and a decline in trust in formerly respected sources of facts (Rand, 2021). We note that formally respected sources are not accepted uncritically; they undergo the same vetting as other sources. Yet we do recognize the difference between sources that seek the best explanations versus sources that seek advantage for the sponsors of propaganda.

The first two trends are exemplified in wording like “alternative facts” (Sinderbrand, 2019), introduced by Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Trump in 2017. The “alternative facts” pertained to the size of the former President’s inaugural crowd, which his supporters exaggerated without any convincing evidence. The wording makes us wonder what an alternative to a fact might be.

The resulting influence of opinion over fact is a direct consequence of a change in the information system (Peters, 2017). Previously dominant information filters, e.g., investigative journalism, are replaced by social media, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as trustworthy sources. This is made possible because information from those sources is easily integrated into our narrative of the world since we choose who we “follow.” We fall into common propaganda techniques like card stacking and confirmation bias. The former is the process of focusing only on one side of an argument, leaving out any other; the latter is a search for or interpretation of information so it fits neatly into existing beliefs. In short, information is used to strengthen the walls of our echo chambers.

Another reason social media is consumed more readily than complex, investigative articles or analyses is because they deliver information in short, easily-digestible soundbites, which then reciprocate themselves. This is an example for the bandwagon effect of propaganda. The resulting influence on our relationships is a strengthening of perceived or selected group identity, which contributes to a fragmented society. Facts do not matter; group identity does. Identity angst is inflamed by not knowing the Other, and fears for one’s own narrative, which forms the basis for one’s identity, grow as it might be replaced with the Other’s narrative. As the world seemingly exists in dichotomies, knowing is reduced to anti-intellectual conformism. This is exacerbated by the incivility that characterizes the discourse on social media. Observing and experiencing inflammatory rhetoric daily, publicly, and without consequences makes it commonplace and normative. The lack of human relationship between sender and receiver erodes their need to be respectful.

People who are inclined to less civil behavior are encouraged, especially when it is modeled by influential people such as politicians. It is a slippery slope from “It’s ok to act like that, I guess ...” to “If I act like that, I will be paid attention to.” Similarly, their behavior can be kept in check if civil discourse is modeled by those they respect.

### Interest Groups and Democracy

In this section we explore the effects of people’s increasing access and susceptibility to propaganda. Specifically, we look at the connections among wealth, power, and the implications of economic inequity for democracy and education.

Undergirding our understanding of propaganda is our recognition that its practitioners seek out emotional vulnerabilities in the target audience. They then determine which of these vulnerabilities are most susceptible to the propaganda tools we have on hand. To illustrate how propaganda is designed, the second author recalls serving in a joint U.S.-Peruvian Armed Forces unit in 1988 that was tasked with analyzing Shining Path guerrilla movement pre-militant members/recruits for their vulnerabilities and susceptibilities. The final conclusions of the PSYOP task force are listed below:

**Table1:** *Shining Path Pre-Militant Members/Recruits Vulnerability and Susceptibility Analysis*

Vulnerabilities	Susceptibility
Fears for their family’s safety	Highly susceptible
Personal safety	Highly susceptible
Dire economic circumstances	Highly susceptible
Lack of resources	Moderately susceptible
Religious orientation	Moderately susceptible
Response to authorities	Moderately susceptible
Political isolation	Low susceptibility
Peasant xenophobia	Low susceptibility

Based on this analysis, the task force recommended the development of messages that played on the fears for family safety, personal safety, and economic hardship. Meanwhile, other members of the task force analyzed the following target audiences for vulnerabilities and susceptibilities: priests, teachers, members of the Peruvian Armed Forces, inner city youth, and college students. One can see that target audiences were systematically identified, evaluated, and then worked on.

Turning to contemporary problems within democratic nations, we see that the perpetuation of current power and wealth structures is counter-productive to a healthy democracy. DuBois (1903) argued that as long as there is wide-spread poverty, democracy cannot exist. Various social choice theorists have pointed to the troubling relationship between democratic rule and extreme economic inequality, reflected in the famous line often attributed to Louis Brandeis that “we may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both” (Dilliard 1992, p. 42). Similarly, Vilfredo Pareto (1984) saw our democratic norms and institutions as masks that placed a dignified cover over the inequitable reality of oligarchy. Most famously of all, sociologist Robert Michels (1911) coined the phrase “Iron Law of Oligarchy” to

describe the tendency of social institutions to drift into authoritarianism. These pessimistic assessments warrant reflection on how they pertain to contemporary American democracy.

To begin, corroboration of Brandeis’ and Pareto’s concerns can be found in the research results of political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014). Their study of 1,179 U.S. government decisions revealed that “elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial impact on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence,” (Martin Gilens & Benjamin Page, 2014, p.1). Further research by the political scientist Lee Drutman (2015, 2017) also illuminates the distortions to democracy introduced by corporations. Drutman’s (2015) grim assessment is that “corporations have achieved a pervasive position that is unprecedented in American political history” (p. 1). Drutman (2017) notes that campaign finance reform is necessary but not forthcoming. Meanwhile, corporations may use their resources and media access to not only shape the messages that the general public receives, but to shape the underlying culture itself. The resulting intellectual chaos renders the U.S. public more vulnerable to believing scapegoats are the root of their problems rather than identifying the actual interest groups that are blocking their advancement. Propaganda consists of dishonest signals designed to benefit the sender at the expense of the receiver. In other words, the information conveyed is duplicitous and biased in favor of the sponsors. To illustrate this more vividly, we now turn to a case study on how propaganda came to dominate the discussion of important political issues facing the United States in 2020, including the response to the coronavirus pandemic.

### **A Point in Case: The Coronavirus Pandemic, Racial Divisions, and Propaganda**

To illustrate the pervasive reach of propaganda and its effects on health care during the pandemic, we draw on the Computational Propaganda Project (CPP). The CPP is a study undertaken by the Programme on Propaganda and Technology, which is a multidisciplinary research and teaching department at Oxford University. Its purpose is the study of the social science of the Internet (Programme on Democracy and Technology, 2022). The CPP tracks 142 junk health news websites and 21 state-backed outlets that routinely publish misleading information—propaganda—about coronavirus. It then evaluates how successful these propaganda venues are in terms of distributing their content on social media and compare their success to that of four credible sources (British Broadcasting Corporation, Guardian, New York Times, Washington Post). The researchers have generated data that is startling. For example, during the week of July 23-29, 2020, the 142 junk news websites (propaganda) consistently reached a greater number of receivers than did the four mainstream (educational) news sites. The 21 state-sponsored propaganda sites likewise had more success in reaching social media than did the mainstream news in question. Hundreds of millions of social media accounts were reached by these propagandistic outlets. Table 2 lists the themes identified by the CPP during the time frames indicated. Note that in the “Theme” column, we use the wording originally deployed by the CPP.

**Table 2:** *Computational Propaganda Project Data April – July 2020*

Time Frame	Theme
July 23 - 29	The supposed efficacy of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for Covid-19.
July 16 - 22	Sowing distrust in US state health officials.
July 9 - 15	Discrediting other news sources on coronavirus; prison release for coronavirus.

July 1 - 7	Misleading reports of the epidemic status of coronavirus; recent increases in violence in Chicago.
June 24 - 30	Implicit criticism of BLM; continued narrative that coronavirus is not as dangerous as portrayed; fueling distrust in public health experts; politicize health news and information by attacking democracies as corrupt and incompetent.
June 22 - 28	Double standards at BLM on social distancing; victimization of conservatism in the US; politics of representation of President Trump's rally in Tulsa; continuing narratives that coronavirus is not as dangerous as portrayed.
June 15	Undermining trust in public health officials; advanced false claims about Trump's success in managing unemployment and economic recovery in the US.
June 8	Co-opted George Floyd for existing narratives.
June 1	Social distancing as attacks on religious freedom.
May 26	Undermining democratic consent to lockdown.
May 18	Misinformation on German intelligence report alleging WHO withholding info on Chinese request; attacks on Democrats over HEROES Act.
May 11	Insinuations of virus origin in Wuhan lab; attacks on non-US citizen residents through criticism of Democrats.
May 4	Hospitals exaggerate coronavirus cases and deaths; claims that Trump did not suggest direct disinfectant injections or defenses of that suggestion.
April 27	Focus on "authoritarian" measures being instituted by elected governors across the US and attacks on Democrats; accusing WHO of incompetence, false information, Chinese bias; supporting Trump's withdrawal from WHO.

Overall, the themes seem tailor-made to create distrust in health officials and foment ethnic/racial divisions. There are several sponsors, both foreign and domestic, that benefit from these conflicts. The interesting point is that domestic sponsors of propaganda seek to *unify* their tribal political elements (even if the misinformation regarding vaccines kills some of them) while using propaganda that *disunites* the wider American public. For example, if attempting to mobilize and unify a category of people (e.g., individuals who have a trait in common such as geographical location, ethnicity, social class, or gender identity), target audience analysis would reveal fault lines and fissures among groups. Tensions surrounding the Black Lives Matters movement and the ineffective governmental response to coronavirus could be leveraged to galvanize ethnic constituencies. The vulnerability—fear for safety—would be identified as something highly exploitable. In other words, target audiences would be highly susceptible to propagandistic messages that played on these fears. The themes would be massaged into more specific messages, such as the ones identified by the CPP in the time frames listed above. Simultaneously, media, intensity, and timing would be identified and calibrated. Impact indicators, such as an increase in ethnic violence or polling data that demonstrated decreased confidence in health officials, would be closely monitored.

While it is common knowledge that domestic politicians benefit by pitting lower class ethnics—Whites, Blacks, Hispanics and Asians, for example—against one another rather than fostering conditions that would create multi-racial working-class coalitions capable of challenging elite interests, the degree to which Wall Street also puts out propaganda in the way of diversions, entertainment spectacles that distract, is somewhat understated. Given the interests and resources available to these entities, it is no surprise that a bewildering flood of propaganda permeates the current social milieu.

Yet as alluded to, the same divisive rhetoric that divides the wider population simultaneously unifies the resulting political blocs into reliable echo chambers. Witness the number of Republicans who believe President Trump had the election stolen from him; the number of conspiracy theorists who believe nanobots are in the vaccines to track our movements or alter our behavior. The January 6 insurrection would not have occurred without the systematic, deliberate deployment of propaganda, and the sponsors were able to incite a mob to storm the capital and almost overthrow our democratic system of government. Q-Anon, the anti-vaccine propaganda, the Big Lie concerning the election have all given domestic constituencies sources of identity and meaning,

These findings give rise to the question whether education can play any role in minimizing people's susceptibility to disinformation. Propaganda is most effective if it uses receivers' emotions to sway their opinions to a predetermined outcome. At its worst, it turns people into zealots whose main priority is to strengthen the foundations of their ideologies. This is often accomplished by selecting or interpreting information in ways that fit neatly into their existing beliefs. As educators, we are asking ourselves what our role is in counteracting these dangerous effects of a continuous and possibly growing propagandistic tidal wave.

### Education and Democracy

*America is the first real experiment in building a large multi-ethnic, multicultural democracy.*  
(Obama, B. in Goldberg, 2020)

Recently implemented limitations on freedom of speech and thought in schools such as those regarding the teaching of Critical Race Theory and current events (TX H.B. 3979, 2021) impinge on the ability of educators to generate critical discussion on important issues. For example, TX H.B. 3979 requires teachers to “explore current issues from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective,” (TX H.B. 3979, 2021, h-1 [2]). This neutral approach is a potentially treacherous path that can quickly lead to conclusions like “there were very fine people on both sides” (PolitiFact & President, 2019), which was President Trump's response to the violent events in Charlottesville in 2017, during which a protester was killed by a white supremacist.

We see a wide variety of stances and theories—Critical Race Theory, the teaching of evolution, evolutionary psychology, reflexivity, just to name a few—that contribute to the intellectual turmoil, the academic freedom, necessary for sustained critical growth. Academic freedom and the ability to criticize all theories is paramount because a fundamental requirement of what it means to be an educated person is one's willingness and ability to re-examine axiomatic assumptions, habitually and rationally. A good explanation can survive criticism (e.g., all current COVID vaccines in the US have survived rigorous Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 clinical trials). We let our mistaken theories die in our place. So, our constructed meanings, while each a valid representation of our internal states, then go through the familiar filter of criticism, including experimental testing when appropriate. It is hard to overcome our emotional predispositions, our feelings of commitment to the cause, our sense of confirmation bias. And while one should be as impartial as possible regarding evaluation of the evidence and arguments, one cannot be neutral in regards to aims, values, and commitments. If we fail in the latter task, we, perhaps unwittingly, become little different from the propagandists we seek to criticize. A case in point is Alan Sokal's (1996) article *Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*,



which put forth the dubious thesis that recent developments in quantum gravity had profoundly progressive political implications and supported this thesis with convoluted, ridiculous arguments. The author wrote it purely as satire. The manuscript was accepted by the editors at *Social Text* and published, presumably because it appealed to their emotions and political predilections, and not because the article made any sense.

### The Role of Higher Education

Schools and institutions of higher learning are thought to be crucibles where students learn to navigate complex social relationships. Yet we have reached a point where a culture of safetyism is culminating in a silencing of cognitive diversity (Haidt, 2016). For decades now, students have been shielded from “offensive” views, which are those that can cause emotional or intellectual discomfort because there exist many facets of any phenomenon, including views directly opposed to one’s own. There is a lack of distinction between conversations on the one hand and discussions and debates on the other, which is why the former rarely happen and quickly turn into the latter. The Latin root of *conversation* is *con-versare*, which means “to turn or dwell with.” This makes much sense as the main component of conversation is to listen rather than to express oneself, and to do so with an open heart to imagine the Other’s lived experiences. In contrast, *discuss* is derived from *dis-cutere*, which means to strike apart. At the crux of this misconception is how we think of, use, and teach knowledge: Do we think of it as discoverable facts that we can utilize to underscore existing understandings, or do we think of it as unstable and ever-changing? Huebner (1979/2008) reminds us that the purpose of every idea and theory is to serve as a stepping stone to a more complex understanding of a phenomenon. Hence, knowledge must be understood “as a source of criticism and imagination, not as a prescription,” (p. 301). If critical thinking is not taught and practiced habitually, the reductionist characteristics of propagandist thinking can seem enticing because of their simplicity. The table below sums up 10 differences between critical thinking and propaganda.

**Table 3:** *Critical Thinking vs. Propaganda* (Garrison, K., personal conversation October 20, 2021)

Critical Thinking	Propaganda
Reality is complex.	Reality is simple.
Uses "doubt" as a tool.	Uses "emotion" as a tool.
Seeks to disprove an idea.	Seeks to persuade.
Disproof is used to refine a theory.	“Proof” is used to confirm a theory.
I know nothing.	“We” know everything.
Knowledge is imperfect and transient.	Perfect truth is available.
Seeks out dissonance.	Seeks out consonance.
Thinking is "open."	Thinking is "closed."

A citizenry that is to advance a democratic society must be educated to think critically. This seems to become an ever-growing challenge if education itself is used as a propaganda tool for the purpose to influence potential voters as is the case with TX H.B. 3979. This curtailing of academic freedom reminds us of just how far states can and do go so as to inhibit discussion on any issues inconvenient to those in power. Propaganda may be about disinformation, but it often works in tandem with censorship.

The world we inhabit consists of diverse knowledges, and all knowledge, as well as all teaching, is not hermetically sealed from the political; perhaps it is inherently political. This notion brings about several dilemmas for educators. Out of fear to sway students in one direction or another, many teachers opt out of engaging with students in difficult conversations and remain neutral. The degree of an educator's neutrality is determined by their positionality, which depends on their location, contextual factors, prior experiences, and the perceived importance of powerful stakeholders (Kello, K., & Wagner, W., 2017). It is probably generally good common sense for K-12 teachers to worry about repercussions from parents and administrators, especially in states where talking about "widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy and social affairs" (TX H.B. 3979, 2021, h-1 [1]) has now become a danger to their professional existence. However, the legislature does not dictate that educators must not make students uncomfortable; rather, it states that we cannot tell students that they "ought" to feel uncomfortable (TX H.B. 3979, 2021, h-1 (6) [7]). But this fact does not prevent teachers who do engage in critical conversations from being bullied or persecuted by those who misunderstand the legislature and deem these conversations un-American.

There are several problems with teacher neutrality. One, it is these very moments of disquietude that are the foundation for a person's cognitive-emotional evolution (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1988). Perhaps more importantly, teacher neutrality implies the baseline assumption that students are unable to deal with multiple perspectives. This might become a self-fulfilling prophecy if students are never given the chance to learn that one perspective does not necessarily negate another and how to engage with people whose views are different from their own. The danger here lies in the fact that the avoidance of disquietude and critical conversations about reality might result in the shrinking of a critical citizenry, which is essential for a participatory democracy. In East Germany, it resulted in successfully silencing criticality altogether, which led to the continuation of an authoritarian regime for 50 years.

Further, teacher neutrality assumes the absence of dominant and dominated cultures and belies the fact that not everybody can express themselves equally. For example, students who attend schools in low socio-economic neighborhoods, who are often children of color, are inadequately prepared to express themselves. Nieto (2013) documents how double segregation (segregation by race and by socio-economic status) and the racialization of ability are reflected in diminished teacher expectations. One of our responsibilities as educators is to democratize knowledge instead of "including" the lived experiences of people of color in the grand narrative. To democratize knowledge means to avoid information asymmetry, to avoid circumstances where elites have monopoly or privileged access to education, and where the results of knowledge are used to primarily benefit those elites because under such circumstances a revolution in thought much in the way Thomas Kuhn (1962) imagined is likely not possible. To democratize knowledge means to question the origins of facts presented as truths and whether knowledge is used to advance existing narratives or make them more complex. As teaching is the process of creating knowledges, the focus need not be on the different perspectives of facts but on their meaning, which is their contextualization, communicated through all our lived experiences.

Finally, silencing leads to conspiratorial thinking because apparently there is something that needs to be kept quiet (Keeley, 1999). And in lieu of difficult conversations in classrooms, students resort back to social media for information, which is a prime resource for conspiracy theories and propaganda as its fundamental MO is to appeal to emotion. The result is epistemological relativism where everything goes, and our rights to our own beliefs is mistaken for rights to our own facts. Barnum (2021) cites four studies that reflect how content on Mexican-American

studies and Black history and culture reduced ninth grade drop-out rates and improved test scores and GPAs. While these studies are limited by their small participation sizes, they show that engaging students in difficult conversation like those about race and identity could possibly have a direct impact on their overall engagement and academic achievement.

Absolute neutrality is likely impossible, and as we argue, dangerous. Both authors, having lived in authoritarian countries (East Germany, Noriega's Panama), are unabashedly partisan in support of democracy over dictatorships. Education requires intellectual honesty and impartial assessment of evidence. We would argue that our goals, values, and commitments to human rights and freedom should be our compass. Much like a COVID-19 vaccine researcher is committed to eradicating the disease, as educators, we can be partial in our goals, values, and commitments yet seek to be impartial in our evaluation of the evidence. Modeling such complex approach to our reality is an essential component of teaching and learning critical thinking in the classroom.

### Conclusion

As educators, we asked ourselves how we got to a point where propaganda is more influential than science and objective facts and what our role is in making sure that this country has the educated citizenry that is arguably a fundamental prerequisite for a multicultural democracy. We have shown how economic inequality and the political powers of groups which are driven by business interests have influenced anti-critical tendencies in educational practices. We delineated the resulting dangers to democracy and the challenges educators face when engaging in complex conversations about social reality. We argued that it is exactly these conversations and the emotional disquietude they bring about that are at the essence of how we need to prepare the next generation so it can participate meaningfully in a democratic society and contribute to its evolution.

Our point is that in order to prepare a generation for the undoubtedly increasing epistemological pitfalls presented by technologically ever more advanced propaganda techniques, education cannot aim for avoidance or conformity. Rather, an urgent goal of education is to enable students to understand the origins and the evolution of their own worldviews so they are capable and courageous to make conscious choices about their approaches to social reality. A prerequisite for this is to engage students in critical conversations on current and historic issues free from fear of social or political persecution so they are confident to question political decisions and the agendas of those who make them. They must be enabled to do so objectively, rather than emotionally, and habitually. This is how education contributes to creating a citizenry that actively part-takes in a multi-cultural democratic society.

Propaganda and conspiracy theories will always exist. The goal is not to eradicate them or their proponents but to learn how to share a time and space with each other to overcome individual, communal, and societal divisions. To enable a citizenry willing and capable of doing this is the charge and the potential of education.

### References

- Barnum, M. (2021, July 8). *Research suggests students benefit from discussing racism*. Chalkbeat. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/7/8/22569197/critical-race-theory-bans-racism-schools-research>.
- Crotty, M. (2004). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Deresiewicz, W. (2014). *Excellent sheep : The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. New York, NY : Free Press, 2014.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folk*. Oxford University Press.
- DiAngelo, Robin. 2018. *White Fragility*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Dilliard, I. (1992). *Mr. justice Brandeis, great American: Press opinion and public appraisal*. UMI.
- Dovidio, J., Gaertner, S. 1986. *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism: Historical Trends and Contemporary Approaches*. Cambridge MA: Academic Press.
- Drutman, Lee. 2015. *The Business of America is Lobbying: How Corporations became Politicized and Politics became more Corporate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Drutman, L. (2017, September 5). *We need political parties. but their rabid Partisanship could destroy American democracy*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/9/5/16227700/hyperpartisanship-identity-american-democracy-problems-solutions-doom-loop>.
- Fazio, R. 1995. Attitudes as object-evaluation association: Determinants, consequences, and correlates of attitude accessibility. In Petty, R. and Krosnik, J. (Eds.) *Attitude strength: antecedents and consequences* (pp. 247-282). Ohio State University Series on Attitudes and Persuasion. Vol. 4. Hillsdale NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Association, inc.
- Friedman, George. (2011). *The Next Decade: Empire and Republic in a Changing World*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Gilens, M., Page, B. (2014). *Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens*. *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3), 564-581.
- Goldberg, J. (2020, November 16). *Why Obama fears for our democracy*. The Atlantic, pp. 1-30.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Haidt, J. (2016). Why concepts creep to the left. *Psychological Inquiry*, 27(1), 40-45. doi:10.1080/1047840x.2016.1115713
- Huebner, D. (1979). Developing teacher competencies. In V. Hillis (Ed.) (1999), *The lure of the transcendent: Collected essays by Dwayne E. Huebner* (pp. 299-311). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Justia. (2021). *Brown v. board of education of TOPEKA, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)*. Justia Law. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/#tab-opinion-1940809>.
- Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659>
- Kello, K., & Wagner, W. (2017). History Teaching as ‘Propaganda’? Teachers’ Communication Styles in Post-Transition Societies. *History Education and Conflict Transformation*, 201-230. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-54681-0\_8
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2020). Just what is critical race theory and what’s it doing in a nice field like education? *Critical Race Theory in Education*, 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-300-5995-2>
- Lee, B. A., & Sharp, G. (2017). Ethnoracial diversity across the RURAL-URBAN Continuum. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 672(1), 26–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217708560>
- Lerer, L. (2020, December 15). How Obama sees this moment. *The New York Times*.

- McWhorter, J. (2020, July 15). *The dehumanizing condescension of 'white fragility'*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>.
- Michels, R. (1911). *Political Parties*. New York: The Free Press.
- Nieto, S. (2013). *Finding joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds: Culturally responsive and socially just practices in U.S. classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Office for Civil Rights. (2021, June 9). *Education in a pandemic*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>.
- Pareto, V. (1984). *The Transformation of Democracy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Peters, M. A. (2017). Education in a post-truth world. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(6), 563-566. doi:10.1080/00131857.2016.1264114
- Popper, K. R. (1971). *Logik der Forschung*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- PolitiFact, & President, D. T. U. S. (2019, April 26). *Politifact - in context: Donald Trump's 'very fine people on both sides' remarks (transcript)*. @politifact. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/apr/26/context-trumps-very-fine-people-both-sides-remarks/>
- Programme on Democracy and Policy. (2020, December 14). *Weekly misinformation Briefings*. DemTech. <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/weekly-misinformation-briefings/>.
- Programme on Democracy and Technology. OII. (2022). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/programme-on-democracy-and-technology/>
- RAND. (2021). *Truth decay: Causes, consequences, and solutions*. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/about-truth-decay.html>.
- Sinderbrand, R. (2019, April 29). *How Kellyanne Conway ushered in the era of 'alternative facts'*. Retrieved April 16, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/>
- Sokal, A. (1996). "Transgressing the Boundaries—Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." *Social Text* 46/47, 217-252.
- TX H.B. 3979 (2021). <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/87r/billtext/pdf/HB03979F.pdf>
- van Fraassen, B. (2002). *The Empirical Stance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Wilczek, F. (2010). *The Lightness of Being: Big Questions, Real Answers*. London: Penguin.

**Sonja Varbelow** is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Angelo State University, responsible for secondary education. Her research explores the role that schooling and education play in the evolution of individual human beings and society at writ. Previous publications include qualitative studies of how early educational experiences enable agency throughout life, multicultural education, and reviews of the works of chaos theorist William Doll and critical pedagogue Ivan Illich.

**William Yaworsky** (PhD University of Oklahoma 2002) is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research interests include the ethnology of Latin America, especially Mexico, state development agencies and NGOs, warfare, propaganda, and social psychology. He has published in journals such as *Current Anthropology*, *Biological Theory*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and *Human Organization*. His current research focuses primarily on propaganda in the context of epistemology.