Matters of Fact and Concern: Conspiracy Theories and Media Literacy Education

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The thrust of Yuya Takeda's thesis is conveyed in his title's hook: "Facts Are Meaningless Unless You Care"—and this relationship with facts is especially relevant in the case of media literacy education. Conspiracy theories have been infused into public discourse, creating what many have called a "post-truth" climate and making it difficult for people to discern what is reliable and accurate in their media consumption. We thus have a renewed imperative to improve media literacy education. However, Takeda is dissatisfied with current approaches that assume that facts, particularly scientific facts, are the antidote to misinformation. His project here is to account for why this reliance on facts is insufficient, so as to make room for future work on what a more effective educational model might entail.

Takeda argues that there is a problem in the theoretical background of media literacy education. In order to correct misinformation purported by conspiracy theories, educators might be inclined to rely upon engagement with scientific facts. Such engagement would involve more than mere exposure to scientifically verified evidence; it would provide training toward the sorts of intellectual habits that would enable students to engage with evidence well. However, Takeda contends, this approach places an over-reliance upon scientific facts, for facts that are separated from values do not meaningfully influence the beliefs of students. After all, literacy is by his definition "participation in meaning-making"—which presumably involves not just assessing one's beliefs based on evidence, but more broadly processing one's attitudes, values, and preferences in relation to the world. An over-reliance on scientific objectivity risks obscuring the personal subjectivity through which students commonly interpret and evaluate information. It is exactly this subjectivity at work when conspiracy theories are taken seriously and held tightly in the minds of students, so mediating the role of controversial beliefs in classroom—and democratic—

discourses will require a more robust account of facts and values than is presently used in media literacy education.

In response to Takeda's insightful intervention into media literacy education, I will identify three challenges to his account for further consideration: First, although I agree that engagement with facts is not sufficient, I will suggest that we could reach that conclusion without requiring that matters of concern are ontologically prior to matters of fact. Second, I will contend that while engagement with facts is not sufficient, it is necessary for media literacy education if we accept certain conceptions of scientific objectivity. Finally, I will encourage Takeda to expand on the implications of these challenges for how we think about conspiracy theories in relation to media literacy.

First, as Takeda puts it, media literacy education ought to better attend to subjectivity because matters of concern are ontologically prior to matters of fact. On the basis of this argument, he concludes, "Understanding literacy as participation in meaning-making and politics as negotiation of values, media literacy education that aims to foster democratic participation ought to make matters of concern its primary focus."[1] This conclusion, that educators should center matters of concern rather than matters of fact when mediating differing views among students, is compelling. It is clear that facts on their own are not sufficient for countering misinformation, which is consistent with empirical research on the difficulties of changing people's minds with regard to deeply held views.[2] However, I wonder why we need to justify this claim at the level of ontological priority. It seems that we could draw from other frameworks to reach a similar conclusion that engagement with bare facts is insufficient for teaching media literacy.

Consider some of the basic intuitions of feminist standpoint theory illustrated through an example. We might imagine that someone standing at the top floor of Stanford's Hoover Tower has a different view of the Bay Area than someone halfway up the building. What one can see will lead to differing observations and, ultimately, conclusions—so the person at the top could make their way down to the middle and get the perspective that they need. But this

presents a reductive view of "standpoint." It is not a matter of interchangeable vantage points, but a matter of what perspectives are uniquely afforded by inhabiting a complex social location. Here is one way that standpoint theory could inform our understanding of the fact/value distinction, which typically differentiates between descriptive "matters of fact" based on empirical observation and prescriptive "matters of value" based on ethical reasoning and a sense of what is right. Facts on this account are verifiable through the scientific method, which means that they can be replicated by others to achieve similar results. In this sense, the top-floor onlooker could go to the middle floor and collect similar observations. Differently, values are not subject to the same standards of justification. They cannot be proven true or false in the way that facts can. Instead, they involve some level of subjective interpretation and expression. Thus, what the top-floor onlooker sees from the middle floor might be entirely different from what the middle-onlooker sees. Their individual interpretations will not align perfectly or completely, for they each offer a unique analytical slice on the matter.

Even if we do not accept this particular account of the fact/value distinction, we can see that feminist standpoint theory does not require that matters of concern are ontologically prior to matters of fact. That is, matters of fact do not necessarily depend on matters of concern. Rather, the standpoint theorist emphasizes that we each have a unique lens through which we interpret our world and with which we make biased, partial, and provisional claims about it.[3] Claims made from one's standpoint are, drawing from Takeda's language, imbued with personal meaning by virtue of that lens. Putting ontological priority aside, then, the standpoint theorist could still endorse Takeda's claim that engagement with facts is not sufficient for media literacy education. Such engagement would be mediated through the students' individual standpoints, so their own processes of meaning-making would play a role in their interpretations of those facts. Takeda's contribution thus stands, but I am not convinced that it hinges on an account of ontological priority.

Here I turn to my second challenge: although matters of fact are not sufficient, they are still necessary for teaching media literacy. I take it that

Takeda at least partly shares this intuition, as he writes in his conclusion that it is important to teach students to fact check, identify information sources, and evaluate credibility—but these practices do require a serious acknowledgement of facts and a corresponding account of objectivity, which at other times Takeda seems to reject. He worries, for example, that current approaches in media literacy education focusing on objective analysis will "erode the sphere of politics by the logic of science." He also cites Hannah Arendt's concerns about the "tyranny of scientific facts" in the public sphere. In both cases, it seems that we could adopt a qualified view of objectivity that is compatible with Takeda's argument: although some might argue that scientific research and inquiry seeks to understand our objective reality, others (for example, the feminist standpoint theorist) contend that scientific claims are also biased, partial, and provisional. We can retain objective scientific standards and provisionally-accepted facts for the purposes of evaluating claims rigorously and collectively—without accepting an overreaching account of scientific objectivity.

To be clear, I endorse Takeda's wariness of objectivity as a primary or exclusive arbiter of the legitimacy of claims in media literacy (and any) education. I just want to protect a qualified view of objectivity that does not treat all claims equally, as Bruno Latour does in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." Having long argued for the social construction of scientific facts, Latour confronts some of the downstream effects of these arguments within our politically polarized society. Large schools of thought have accepted that, he writes, "facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives."[4] While Latour "intended to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts," he did not want to eliminate standards of evaluation by appealing exclusively to personal subjectivity.[5] Matters of fact regarding, for example, climate change do aid our understanding of global conditions and provide action-guiding insights on how to address this crisis. Unless Takeda wants to reject scientific objectivity

rather than simply warn against its undue influence, I take it that matters of fact are insufficient but necessary for media literacy education.

Although I have pushed Takeda on the issues of ontological priority and the necessity of facts and objectivity, I want to conclude by highlighting the strength of his thesis and its importance in understanding conspiracy theories in media literacy education. As he observes, there is a deep epistemological tension between modern science, which aims to reveal "what things are," and conspiracy theories, which aim to determine "what things mean." Although these descriptive and interpretive aims need not be at odds, they conflict when the conspiracy theorist's claims are motivated by the rejection of both the methods and influence of scientific research. Takeda notes that the attractiveness of a conspiracy theory is derived in part from its marginality—it is not commonly held, it undermines mainstream assumptions, and it delegitimizes the epistemic authority of ruling institutions like media, science, and government. For the conspiracy theorist, facts presented by the CDC, the New York Times, or Harvard University might have exactly the wrong credentials to be legitimate or convincing. From here we can make a more general point: what matters to any of us (whether due to personal experiences, value systems, or other aspects of our social positions) influences what we see as the proper credentials for matters of fact. Doubling down on scientifically verified facts in media literacy education will only alienate those who hold conspiracy-based views and deepen divides, which is why Takeda aptly diagnoses this as over-reliance.

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1 Yuya Takeda, "Facts Are Meaningless Unless You Care: Media Literacy Education on Conspiracy Theories," Philosophy of Education 78, no. 2 (same issue).

2 See Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

3 Helen Longino, "Essential Tensions—Phase Two: Feminist, Philosophical, and Social Studies of Science," in A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt (New

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York: Routledge, 2002), 198-216.

4 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Critical Inquiry 30, no. 2 (2004): 227.

5 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 227.