Connection, not correction, First: A Principle of Belonging in an Era of Conspiracy

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In Yuya Takeda's compelling paper, *Critical Media Literacy: Balancing Skepticism and Trust Toward Epistemic Authorities*, the point of departure is an exploration between critical media literacy practitioners and conspiracy theorists in terms of their relation to skepticism and trust.[1] An accompanying consideration is the educational desirability of skepticism, where Takeda defines skepticism as a form of vigilance toward epistemic authorities as opposed to a classical definition in the epistemological sense (that is, in relation to knowledge attainment). Skepticism defined as such is juxtaposed with the power of trust—a social competence exercised toward the epistemic authorities in a society such as the media, academic institutions, and the government. I deeply appreciate Takeda's constructive approach toward conspiracy theorists by building a bridge to the praxis of critical media literacy. This paper opens discursive space to acknowledge, examine, and recognize the fluid dynamic between critical and conspiratorial dispositions and ways of thinking.

In responding to this paper, I turn to my own research experiences. Over the past few years, I have co-led the conceptualization, design, and national roll out of violence prevention programs to counter radicalization.[2] These programs, which were built for educators and educational staff in K-12 schools and Higher Education institutions, have been funded with consecutive Innovation Grants awarded by the Department of Homeland Security's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, and are housed at Columbia University's Teachers College.[3] Our audiences have expanded beyond educators and students to include law enforcement, journalists, medical professionals, and faith leaders. You may reasonably wonder: what relevance do these experiences have in relation to conspiracy theories, critical media literacy, skepticism, and trust?

During these experiences, I have worked with formerly radicalized individuals, many of whom subscribed to conspiracy theories and narrated that

they used to exhibit the concomitant epistemic habits that typically accompany such ways of thinking including, but not limited to: a. self-sealing conspiracy theories that are unaffected by new sources of information and preserve a sense of both impenetrability and un-falsifiability; b. the appearance of contradictory evidence integrates into the existing conspiracy theory which, in turn, further strengthens one's adherence to said theory; and c. joining a community of fellow conspiracy theorists offers a sense of belonging. Takeda's relational approach to the notions of skepticism and trust enable our theories and practices to shift from a correction-first to a connection-first paradigm in relation to epistemic authorities.

To illustrate the correction-first paradigm, consider a wide range of examples that engender the quintessential case of the conspiratorial mindset. A student in class questions whether the COVID-19 pandemic occurred; an internet personality alleges that victims of a school shooting are crisis actors; or a politician stokes fears about a coordinated campaign to systematically replace the voters in one country with migrants from the "under-developed world." Now, a straightforward pedagogical response would be to correct the factual inaccuracy by offering evidence from trusted sources of information to the conspiracy theorists in the room. However, we all know that this alone seldom works in correcting the erroneous or misinformed beliefs.[4]

What I have found through my engagements with formerly radicalized persons is that a correction-first approach only serves to further entrench a person's entanglement within a conspiracy theory. Further, the motivation behind subscribing to a conspiracy theory is crucially tied to an unaddressed grievance experienced by the individual that creates an opening for the misinformed narrative or theory to take root.[5] Setting aside formerly radicalized persons, a grievance in any member of the public—whether in school or in the workplace or in the home—can lead to a wide range of social phenomena that prompt individuals to be primed to adopt conspiratorial ways of thinking. These phenomena include isolation, neglect, peer rejection, and an abiding sense of invisibility in the classroom, workplace, or community. A correction-first approach meets the person at the level of a factual or informational gap rather

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than a connective gap.[6]

A connection-first approach seeks to establish a solid foundation of trust such that – in an ideal scenario— a sense of Aristotelian reciprocity (that is, care for the well-being and moral excellence of one's friends or peers) becomes the basis for any discussions of epistemic significance. We regularly under-value and underestimate the power and significance of establishing our care prior to our credibility. Students are already led to believe that the teacher is an epistemic authority by virtue of their role in the life of the classroom. On the contrary, students are not always conditioned to presume that their educators care about them. So, a connection-first approach equips educators, practitioners, and well-minded citizens to practice a method wherein connection between an epistemic authority and a learner is prior to or at least parallel with the epistemic bond built between these two agents.

At the institutional level, this begins to get tricky. Building on Takeda's example of consolidated media outlets, the entities that assume the role of epistemic authority derive their authority through dedicated and committed staff members working with a code of ethics or list of principles. Viewing the actions of an institution, which are multifaceted and carried out by a variety of individuals, is far more difficult than focusing one's attention on a single human being. The structure of trust in relation to an epistemic authority changes as the authority grows from one person to an entire institution. Trust between two individuals is a matter of personal comportment, speech, and shared values. Trust between, for example, a media organization and a consumer (that is, reader) is complicated by the variegated nature of truth-telling in media organizations, which are constituted by a group of individuals attempting to maintain the norms that define the institution's credibility. For example, the New York Times has been consistently praised for its Pulitzer-prize winning investigative reporting; however, internal disputes regarding consistent adherence to journalistic rigor at the New York Times among the editorial team and staff have punctuated the history of the organization.[7] Furthermore, reliance on a single news source breeds complacency in consumers who will read and subsequently regurgitate the prevailing views shared in major national and international publications. This is

one of the reasons why the gradual demise of local media reporting—in terms of its institutional forms and organizations—weakens our resilience to misinformation, disinformation, and subscriptions to conspiracy theories alongside the social phenomena outlined above.[8] So, what does it mean to—as Takeda carefully notes—build a *symbiotic* relationship between skepticism and trust?

The root of the word symbiosis itself orients us toward an image—*living together*. The concerns of an epistemic nature scaffolded with critical media literacy—veracity, exploring multiple viewpoints, possessing a robust conception of social justice—cannot be adequately analyzed or integrated into our public institutions without a sincere and ongoing engagement in the act of creating a sense of belonging, of being with one another, of believing in the beloved community that Martin Luther King Jr. devoted his life to realize in the pursuit of justice for all. While I am deeply sympathetic to, and seek to continuously learn from, the normative frameworks that establish epistemic foundations for analysis, discourse, and argument, the guiding norms and atmosphere in which any analysis, discourse, and argumentation occurs is inextricably linked to the quality of epistemic activity and the educational prospects of the participants involved. The symbiosis between trust and skepticism in relation to epistemic authorities and learners is a question of great epistemological significance but it is at its root a question of friendship, love, and belonging. If that in any way sounds conspiratorial, then I will gladly confess my espousal of this theory.

REFERENCES

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