

# Critical Media Literacy: Balancing Skepticism and Trust Toward Epistemic Authorities

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## INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, there was a hope, a democratic hope that pervaded the discourse on the internet. The participatory nature of the internet would empower people, facilitate their active engagement with politics, and subvert authoritarianism; the access to this ocean of information would make it possible for people to juxtapose, relativize, and evaluate dueling information and opinions; and the World Wide Web would undermine ideologies and foster mutual understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds, to name a few strands of this hope.<sup>1</sup> Three decades later, such hopeful prospects appear nothing other than naïveté. The wider access to information produced an excess of information, turning attention into a valuable commodity over which people compete. In the so-called attention economy, what matters is the sheer volume of attention one can attract. Whether fanatic or furious, the more intense the reactions, the more influential the utterance becomes in today's discursive environment. As a result, extreme discourses go rampant on social media, while nuanced arguments that are crucial for deliberation are inhibited. The once idealized state of democratization of knowledge—where the boundaries between experts and laypersons becomes blurry—is now interpreted as an excessive state of epistemic instability called “post-truth” which is thought to be a threat to humanity, especially during a time of the climate crisis and a global pandemic.

Against such a backdrop, critical literacy, and its more specialized form, critical media literacy, attain their significance now more than ever. With its promotion of a skeptical and insatiable posture for continuous reading and writing of the wor(l)d, critical literacy asks: “What is ‘truth’? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts and discourses? For what purposes?”<sup>2</sup> The

relevance of these questions is evident especially when commercially driven algorithms search, curate, and (re)present the personalized timeline as “it’s what’s happening”—so says the tagline of what was formally known as Twitter.

However, the same set of questions that are posed to cultivate people’s critical literacy are also asked by the very people who are often criticized for lacking media literacy—conspiracy theorists. The point of departure for this paper is the striking similarities between the dispositions critical media literacy education aims to cultivate and the characteristics conspiracy theorists claim to embody. What I wish to illuminate through this juxtaposition, however, is not a way to clearly demarcate “critical” from “conspiratorial” theorizing but a question about the educational desirability of skepticism. Skepticism, in this paper, is not understood as a classical epistemological question of the possibility of knowledge attainment, but as a form of vigilance toward epistemic authorities like the government, media, and academic institutions.

By examining the striking similarities between the ways skepticism manifest in critical media literacy and conspiracy theories, I claim that the educationally desirable form of skepticism must accompany a constructive attitude toward epistemic authorities.

Although conspiracy theories are discussed in a rather negative light in this paper to caution against radical skepticism, it is important to treat this textual genre with nuance. This is largely because of the fact that actual conspiracies take place rather frequently in politics—such as Watergate scandal, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the National Security Agency’s mass surveillance—and, thus, stigmatization of conspiracy theorizing makes it easier for conspirators to get away with their conspiracies.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Martin Orr and Ginna Husting point out, the label “conspiracy theory” has been abused to “silence, trivialize, or demonize critics of the abuse of power” especially when criticisms come from marginalized groups.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in this paper, I incorporate a relatively neutral definition of conspiracy theory: a theory that explains the deceptive actions of a group of people—the conspirators—as a significant causal factor for historical, ongoing, or future events.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I first discuss two points of convergence between critical media literacy and conspiracy theories: skepticism toward mainstream media and epistemic authorities. This is followed by an examination of the problems of radical skepticism that characterises some conspiracy theories. I then discuss the pivotal epistemic role trust plays in democracy. After that, I conclude the paper by discussing the importance of balancing skepticism and trust in critical media literacy education.

### CRITICAL OR CONSPIRATORIAL?

The four dimensions of critical literacy delineated by Lewison et al. provide a concise but flexible framework to think about the praxis of critical literacy. The four dimensions include:

1. disrupting the common place,
2. interrogating multiple viewpoints,
3. focusing on sociopolitical issues
4. taking action and promoting social justice.<sup>6</sup>

Below are quotes from an ethnographic study conducted by Jaron Harambam that seem to resonate with the four dimensions of critical literacy cited above. Harambam presents quotes from the participants of his study:

Virtually all respondents emphasize how they “don’t heave and roll on the ground waves of society” (Liam) but instead are “skeptic by nature” (Michael), “dare to think differently” (Pauline), “think out of the box” (Lucy), and “put question marks over nearly everything” (Steven)....

What critical thinking encourages them to do is “to look at things from multiple perspectives, to consult multiple sources, but mostly to think for yourself and to be able to adjust previously held convictions” (William)....

“I’ve always had a desire for freedom, so when you feel that certain systems, be they work, or school, or what have you, are oppressive, you start looking for something that liberates

you, and that's how I came here" (Lauren)....

"It is up to the people and the critical thinkers, it is up to the people who resist and long for change to finally unite with each other and actually start taking actions, because if everyone would indeed remain passive, you will hold back that change" (Steven).<sup>7</sup>

Readers may already know the point I am trying to make here. These quotes are from a book titled, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, in which Jaron Harambam discusses his ethnographic study of the conspiracy milieu in the Netherlands. Through ethnographic and (auto)biographic approaches, Harambam illustrates how people in the conspiracy culture position themselves. As is evident in the quotes above, there are striking similarities in appearance between the dispositions critical literacy education aims to cultivate and the ones conspiracy theorists claim to embody. In the following section, I further discuss the intricacy between critical media literacy and conspiracy theories by highlighting the shared skepticism toward mainstream media and epistemic authorities.

#### SKEPTICISM TOWARD MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES

One of the most salient themes in the Dutch conspiracy milieu Harambam reports is skepticism towards mainstream media. This skepticism is driven by the high concentration of media ownership by a few multinational corporations. According to Harambam, websites in the conspiracy milieu contain articles pointing out the fact that six companies own 90% of the media in the United States: General Electric, NewsCorp, Walt Disney, Viacom, AOLTimeWarner, and CBS. These articles also decry the demise of independent journalism in Europe. One of the participants of the study, Howie, laments the increasing unification of how the world is represented by the media:

In the early nineties you would still have different takes on world events broadcasted in the evening news in France, Germany or here. That window to the world would be radically different

in each country. Nowadays we all get the same video on our evening news due to the increasing internationalization of media corporations and press agencies. It's the same piece of film with that same crying person.<sup>8</sup>

Echoing this, the danger of concentrated media ownership and the unification of representations is pointed out by Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share in their influential article on critical media literacy:

The consolidation of ownership of the mass media has given control of the public airwaves to a few multinational oligopolies to determine who and what is represented and how. This concentration of ownership threatens the independence and diversity of information and creates the possibility for the global colonization of culture and knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Similar point is made by critical media literacy scholars Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff. In their recent book, *United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-truth America (and What You Can Do about It)*, they criticize corporate-owned media and argue that the manipulation of information arising from profit-driven journalism is compromising the crucial role of media for democracy.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to their skepticism toward mainstream media, both critical literacy and conspiracy theories take critique of authority to be their central task. "Motivated by a self-proclaimed skepticism," Harambam says that conspiracy theorists he interviewed "criticize every form of dogmatism, particularly that which characterizes modern science."<sup>11</sup> Participants in Harambam's study demonstrate frustration not only because of what they see as science's dogmatic rejection of everything that is not empirically verifiable, but also the impossibility of inserting one's voice in the conversation. In Julie's words:

I am also a human being and I have done my study of life, so why? I have my own feelings and emotions and experience so why? Because you've studied you know how it works, right? When you haven't studied you don't count in this society.<sup>12</sup>

Due to their sense of exclusion, the purported rigor and impartiality of scientists appear as rigidity and impenetrability. Because the conspiracy milieu seems to better enact the free spirit of inquiry that is supposed to be the driver of science, the participants of Harambam's study posit that "modern science is *not scientific enough*, since it has lost the openness and skepticism that should inform the habitus of the ideal scientist."<sup>13</sup> Harambam summarizes participants' sense of resentment as follows:

All stories thus point towards the structural inequalities between the educated, scientifically trained experts, and ordinary laymen. Scientists are considered an untouchable elite exerting social and moral power over ordinary people and are thought to operate in alliance with other elitist members of society such as politicians, multinationals, and medical industries.<sup>14</sup>

The conspiracy milieu thus provides vocabularies for this *epistemic class struggle*: these vocabularies are used for contesting what counts as knowledge, expressing frustration for the dismissive attitudes of the experts, and demanding more open and free inquiry.

Critical literacy, too, takes seriously the contestation of epistemic authority and claims the legitimacy of excluded voices. Henry Giroux talks about a similar exercise of power with his notion of "textual authority" which legitimates certain discursive practices by valuing certain utterances and a range of interpretations while delegitimizing others. He states:

What is important to stress here is that the notion of textual authority can be used either to silence students by denying their voice, that is, by refusing to allow them to speak from their own histories, experiences, and social positions, or it can enable them to speak by being attentive to how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and critical way.<sup>15</sup>

What is notable here is that Giroux is not suggesting to simply affirm all voices,

but by creating a space for those voices to be heard, they can also be critically examined. Dogmatic exercises of textual authority are rejected for affirmative *and* critical examination. Further, critical literacy scholars are attentive to the possibility of dogmatic use of scientific authority. Referring to Jürgen Habermas's distinction of technical, practical, and emancipatory types of knowledge, Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren state:

A problem here is that under the domination of positivist discourses and “scientism” in particular, the technical has tended to usurp a virtual monopoly over the claim to paradigm status, subordinating and distorting practical and emancipatory concerns, with disastrous consequences for human advancement.<sup>16</sup>

In a democratic society, skepticism toward media and other epistemic authorities are essential in holding those in power accountable. As reviewed above, what drives the suspicion against the mainstream media is the consolidation of ownership and their corporate financial interests. There is no wonder, therefore, conspiracy theorists pose the same golden question of critical literacy: “who benefits?”

In addition to the growing economic inequality, both critical media literacy and conspiracy theories are concerned about the epistemic injustice that silences and trivializes the knowledge claims that do not meet the standard of dominant technoscientific rationality. It at least partially explains why conspiracy theories became a center of public concern during the COVID-19 pandemic where the governance of people's conducts and expedient policy-decisions were justified based supposedly on experts' inputs. Here, the source of skepticism is not necessarily the reliability of experts' knowledge, but the ways in which their voices are heavily weighed *vis-à-vis* the voices of others. As a critical media literacy researcher and educator, I posit that these forms of skepticism are not only justifiable but also desirable for the maintenance of democracy. Yet, this is not to suggest that all conspiracy theories are aligned with the educational goals of critical media literacy. In the next section, I will highlight the problems of radical skepticism that characterizes some conspiracy theories.

## THE PROBLEMS OF RADICAL SKEPTICISM

In his seminal paper, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” Brian L. Keeley argues against “the most commonly voiced complaint” about unwarranted conspiracy theories—unfalsifiability—and instead claims that the problem with some conspiracy theories is their radical skepticism toward “a social mechanism of warranted belief production.”<sup>17</sup> Falsifiability, Keeley says, is a “perfectly fine criterion” for natural sciences where the object of investigation is neutral with respect to our queries. However, he claims “that unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter.” Because the objects of investigation in conspiracy theories involve deception and abuse of power, unfalsifiability as a criterion rejects conspiracy theories “at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered.” Instead of their unfalsifiability, Keeley locates the problem of some conspiracy theories in their radical skepticism toward epistemic authorities that secure the trustworthiness of knowledge upon which any form of positive evidence is based:

These theories throw into doubt the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence. In doing so, they reveal just how large a role trust—in both institutions and individuals—plays in the justification of our beliefs. The problem is this: most of us—including those of us who are scientists and who work in scientific laboratories full of expensive equipment—have never carried out the experiments or made the empirical observations that support most contemporary scientific theories.<sup>18</sup>

There are three interrelated insights to highlight here. First, Keeley illuminates the untenability of radical skepticism. Deriving the insights from social epistemology, Keeley argues that so much of our knowledge depends on testimonies of others. Particularly significant here is that even scientists do not verify all of the knowledge claims first-hand, but rely on the claims made by other scientists. Without taking at least some of those knowledge claims as given, one cannot



even doubt or disagree with others. Reminiscent here is Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of hinge: "the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn."<sup>19</sup>

Second, Keeley highlights that a fundamental function of institutions is securing this hinge. To think about this function, Keeley provides a useful distinction between metaphysical and epistemic issues. The former is a question of truth while the latter is a matter of warrant.<sup>20</sup> While it is true that epistemic authorities are fallible and their statement may be false in a metaphysical sense, what makes them "epistemic authorities" is their entitlement to warrant and authorize certain knowledge-claims as relatively reliable and durable. This makes the institutional practice of science possible. Epistemic authorities are *instituted* as a response to our finitude that necessitates the reliance on others' testimony to complexify our understanding of the world.

Third, Keeley underscores the epistemic role of trust. Although he posits that trust plays a large role in justifying our beliefs, he does not elaborate further on this concept. From the perspective of critical media literacy, the concept of trust is a curious one: would promotion of trust toward epistemic authorities be in tension with critical media literacy's promotion of skepticism? If they are compatible, how can we balance the two? In what follows, drawing on the literature of political epistemology, I explore the epistemic roles of trust in a democratic society.

### THE EPISTEMIC ROLES OF TRUST

In political epistemology, the concept of trust is often explored in relation to the idea of expertise. This is because political epistemology is a field that concerns the role of knowledge in political practices. Thus, the position of experts in political decision-making is one of the central topics of discussion. "Expertise", Gloria Origgi argues, "is not just knowledge. It is delegated authority."<sup>21</sup> When someone is recognized as an expert based, for example, on a qualification like a doctorate degree, an identity such as Indigenous Elder, et cetera, a certain level of authority is delegated to the person as a source of

information for decision-making or problem-solving. In a democratic society, such an authority needs to be legitimized through some kind of mechanism to avoid the abuse of power.

It is tempting to appeal to the accountability measures as this legitimation mechanism. However, Lisa Herzog points out the insufficiency of accountability and argues that it must be complemented by trust relationships. Herzog argues that the indicator- and metric-based system of accountability “can all too easily degenerate into a tick-the-box exercise, or even distort the practices it is supposed to hold to account.”<sup>22</sup> The problem of accountability is not only about its tendency to alienate the experts from their tasks and undermine their intrinsic motivation, but it is ultimately also about its practical and theoretical impossibilities. About the practical impossibility, she states, “in the messy reality we inhabit, full control of expert communities is simply not an option. It would be overly costly and impractical to weave the net of control so finely that no abuse could ever take place.”<sup>23</sup> Echoing John Hardwig, Herzog posits that there are no “people-proof” institutions. Even when strict accountability measures are in place, interested parties always find loopholes and tricks to bend the rules in their own favor. Furthermore, when it comes to a highly specialized field, the community of expert can be so small that it is unfeasible to prevent social factors—like friendship and rivalries—to get into the way of making sober assessment. In some cases, it may be impossible to find an evaluator who has detailed enough knowledge to make adequate judgement on a niche expert’s work.

In addition to these practical reasons, there is a theoretical reason why accountability must be complemented by trust: the problem of fact-value dichotomy. In both processes of knowledge-making and decision-making, facts and values cannot be clearly separated. First, decision-making can never be made based solely on facts, but it must be guided by the purposes and goals based on certain values and interests.<sup>24</sup> Although this seems to be a truism, in the times of crises like climate change and global pandemic, it is tempting to appeal for technocratic and epistocratic decision-making. In fact, in a climate strike such as Fridays for Future, people chant “trust science” and call for a

policy that is based on “the best united science available currently.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, policies that restrict people’s freedom were made and justified based supposedly on the opinions of experts like virologists and epidemiologists. This is not to suggest that we should not make decisions based on the best available scientific evidence, but we should be cautious against the illusion of de-politicized decision-making. Such an illusion is dangerous because it helps not only politicians transfer their responsibility to experts, but also humans hand over their responsibility to Nature.

Second, the scientific practice of knowledge-making cannot escape from value judgements either. As Hilary Putnam points out in his book, *The Collapse of the Fact/ Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, how normativity permeates the practice of science because “judgements of ‘coherence,’ ‘plausibility,’ ‘reasonableness,’ ‘simplicity,’ and what Dirac famously called the ‘beauty’ of a hypothesis are all normative judgements in Charles Peirce’s sense, judgements of ‘what ought to be’ in the case of reasoning.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, these value judgements are historically conditioned, thus there are elements of contingency in knowledge-making.

Third, knowledge-making and decision-making are not separate processes, but they mutually influence one another. Contrary to what Matthew C. Lucky calls “the linear model of science and politics,” which assumes scientific knowledge-making to be occurring prior to and independent of subsequent political decision-making, these processes are bi-directional and intertwined.<sup>27</sup> What this suggests is that we cannot clearly demarcate the realm of facts and the realm of values and neatly attribute them to science and politics respectively. However, despite that “knowledge is always, potentially, political,” Herzog states,

this does not mean that we should give up the ideal of agreement on basic facts, even among those who disagree about values and about the interpretation of facts—for the alternative, ultimately, is a situation in which each political side has its own claims to truth, and its own methods for establishing facts, which makes processes of democratic deliberation and decision-making impossible.<sup>28</sup>

Trust plays a pivotal role in establishing an agreement on basic facts because trust is a moral concept, which is better suited to address the elements of values than the amoral concept of accountability. Referring to Annette Baier's example, Herzog explains why trust is a moral concept: "Kant's neighbors who counted on his regular habits as a clock . . . might be disappointed with him if he slept in one day, but not let down by him, let alone had their trust betrayed."<sup>29</sup> As this example vividly illustrates, trust is a moral concept because when the entrusted fails to live up to one's trust, one experiences a sense of betrayal. Where trust is foregrounded in the relationship between experts and society, Herzog says, "the experts themselves are aware of their moral obligations to fulfill the expectations directed toward them."<sup>30</sup> Trust is thus a pivotal concept that acknowledges the elements of values in knowledge- and decision-making while promoting the sense of response-ability that enables deliberation. Therefore, Origgi calls trust "a social competence" through which reciprocal relationships are established: "We accept a certain dose of vulnerability in trusting others and we expect that this vulnerability is considered by the trustee as a normative pressure to act in responsible way towards us."<sup>31</sup> Trust is an essential element in science as a collective enterprise because the sense of responsibility it promotes prevents knowledge-making from a wrong kind of politicization. In Torsten Wilholt's words:

If trusting someone in her capacity as information provider involves a reliance on her having the right attitude towards the possible consequences of her work, epistemic trust is likely to be intricately interwoven with general expectations regarding the scientist's sense of responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

As the above discussion demonstrates, political epistemologists see trust to be playing a pivotal epistemic role. Because of its moral character, trust is well-suited to address the elements of values in knowledge- and decision-making, and it enables the institutional practice of warranting knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

Taking the striking similarities between the forms of skepticism between

critical media literacy and conspiracy theories as a point of this departure, I examined the educational desirability of skepticism. Drawing on philosophy of conspiracy theories and social epistemology, I highlighted the problem with radical skepticism and the pivotal epistemic role of trust. Based on my exploration, I claim that critical media literacy education for democratic citizenship must strike a balance between the promotion of skepticism and the promotion of trust toward epistemic authorities. The question remains whether these two are in tension with one another or not. To answer this, the following analogy illustrated by Dan Sperber et al. provides a valuable insight:

When we walk down a street through a crowd of people, many at very close quarters, there is a constant risk of inadvertent or even intentional collision. Still, we trust people in the street, and have no hesitation about walking among them. Nor is it just a matter of expecting others to take care while we ourselves walk carelessly. We monitor the trajectory of others, and keep an eye out for the occasional absentminded or aggressive individual, automatically adjusting our level of vigilance to the surroundings. Most of the time, it is low enough to be unconscious and not to detract, say, from the pleasure of a stroll, but it rises when the situation requires. Our mutual trust in the street is largely based on our mutual vigilance. Similarly, in communication, it is not that we can generally be trustful and therefore need to be vigilant only in rare and special circumstances. We could not be mutually trustful unless we were mutually vigilant.<sup>33</sup>

As this analogy implies, skepticism and trust can be directed in such a way to mutually complement each other.

One of the paradoxes of the so-called “post-truth” condition is that epistemic authorities are both undermined and valorized. On the one hand, the advancement in communication technologies democratized the publication of texts. This had the effect of blurring the boundaries between experts and laypeople and eroding the prominence of authoritative texts. On the other hand, the increased volume, mobility, and velocity of information produce a

greater need for the verification of their authenticity and reliability. In the age of AI where the deepfake technology is capable of making world leaders say anything in a fabricated video, our reliance on epistemic authorities—in this case, established media—in verifying and authenticating texts likely increases. Against such a backdrop, critical media literacy for active democratic citizenship must strive to strike a symbiotic relationship between skepticism and trust.

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