Facts are Meaningless Unless You Care: Media Literacy Education on Conspiracy Theories

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The aim of this paper is to propose an antithesis to the overreliance on scientific facts and objectivity to counter mis- and disinformation in media literacy education. As an antithesis, my negative argument will not be sufficient to provide a solution by itself. However, through this, I hope to re-examine the role of literacy—participation in meaning-making—in this anomic time and prepare a ground for the synthesis.

Although some may find the title a bit controversial, the main argument I would like to put forward in this paper is a simple one: facts that are separated from values are in themselves meaningless. For those who are familiar with the critique of facts-values dichotomy, this statement may even sound banal. However, in the supposedly "post-truth" world, temptation to re-stabilize the ground of facts is palpable. I say "supposedly" because the genre of texts associated with the phenomenon of post-truth like fake news and conspiracy theories are not new, but those issues are foregrounded in public discourses today and such foregrounding makes their presence more vividly felt.

For instance, Mordechai Gordon proposed three virtues that he believes should be emphasized more in education to counter the post-truth condition, which include: (1) respect for evidence, (2) cautious skepticism, and (3) pragmatic openness.[1] Respect for evidence is straightforwardly about looking at evidence and listening to experts' judgements. Cautious skepticism, according to Gordon, refers to "the ability to ask good questions, to not take ideas for granted even if they sound plausible, and to listen carefully to people who disagree with you so as to avoid the danger of confirmation bias," and pragmatic openness is "the willingness to modify our views when the evidence suggests that change is warranted."[2] These three virtues, Gordon says, "are indispensable tools for citizens in democratic societies that need to be able to continuously differentiate between truths on the one hand and misinformation on the other."[3] While I resonate with Gordon's sense of urgency, I am concerned that these three virtues, all of which

sound like something we learn in a science class, erode the sphere of politics by the logic of science. In fact, Gordon shares the following quote from McIntyre and endorses the argument that this attitude should be extended to politics and social sciences: "the strength of science is that it embraces an attitude of constantly checking one's beliefs against the empirical evidence, and changing those beliefs as one learns what the facts are."[4]

Similar arguments are made by researchers of media literacy. Lamenting the truth being "a relative concept rather than scientific one" in the present media environment, Colin Barton promotes critical media literacy as an approach to alleviate the situation.[5] He states, "what is key in both critical consciousness and critical media literacy, from an epistemological sense, is evaluation and judgement formulated by objective analysis."[6]

While I am sympathetic to the sense of urgency and efforts to re-stabilize the idea of truth, I posit that recourse to scientific facts and objectivity will only take us so far. I even venture to argue that without recognizing the limits of science in navigating our political lives, there is a great risk of exacerbating the crisis of truth and knowledge those authors aim to alleviate. This is because the scientific agreement on objectivity is made possible by eliminating the subjective realm of reality and treating truth and knowledge as matters of facts. However, as I argue below, meanings and values are constitutive of the life-world and matters of concern are ontologically prior to the matters of facts. Thus, dismissal of matters of concern and alienation of people from their life-world would not be effective, especially when those people are skeptical of existing institutions that authorize the matters of fact.

In what follows, drawing mainly on phenomenology and existentialism, I first examine the key concepts in the title of this paper: meaning, care and facts. After that, I discuss conspiracy theories as a textual genre that is driven by the desire for meaning. In the conclusion, I briefly sketch my blueprint for the future synthetic work.

MEANING, CARE, FACTS
THE MEANING OF MEANING

Even though we very often use the word "meaning" in everyday conversations, in scholarly arguments the meaning of the concept of meaning is

rather vague. A Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka states:

> The concept of meaning shares its (apparent) obviousness
> with all basic concepts which are so common that their nature
> resists the ordinary way of defining as the rules of definition in
> traditional logic would have it. Such are the concepts of being,
> of happening, of appearing.[7]

The concept of meaning is so ubiquitous that we normally look through what it means, but the centrality of such a basic concept in our lives suggests that we need to attentively look at it. A philosophical tradition that is suited for such task of looking at what we normally look through is phenomenology.[8]

Reflecting on the everyday usage of meaning, some may say that meaning is a descriptive concept that associates one entity with others. The quintessential example of which is a dictionary. The word clock, for example, is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "an instrument that measures and indicates the time by means of a dial or a digital display."[9] However, when we experience something as "meaningful," there seems to be much more than a simple association of A with B. The meaningfulness of a clock, for instance, is felt when one is in an examination room trying to finish a test or if a particular clock is a gift from someone important.

A Japanese philosopher, Seiji Takeda argues that meaning is a fundamentally existential phenomenon. Through his phenomenological investigation, Takeda discusses the original inseparability between temporality, spaciality, and meaning. Imagine a primitive living being. With its perceptual abilities, this living being experiences something as pleasant or unpleasant. Through repeated exposure to this pleasant or unpleasant something, with an aid of memory, this living being develops an ability to anticipate the experience. This remote perception generates the life-world as a spacially and temporally segmented structure. Hence, the genesis of the life-world is a rupture in the undifferentiated unity.

The phenomenon of meaning appears when an entity in the world is experienced with the spacio-temporal distance. Takeda states:

> What it means for a conscious living being to have an "object"
> is that the immediacy of existence vanishes with the emergence
> of a chasm to be overcome—time and space—leaving in its

place an ontological rift. Existential being is a ceaseless pos-
sibility for overcoming this chasm, as well as for turning the
immediacy of existence into mediation—this is the meaning
of the "meaning."[10]

What is important to note here is that Takeda, like Heidegger, does not presup-
pose a priori existence of individual objects in the world. Rather, encountering
something as an object is made possible when the world is spacio-temporally
segmented by a living being through erotic value judgements of pleasure-dis-
pleasure. The ontological rift emerging through this segmentation is the source
of meaning. Therefore, meaning is a fundamentally existential phenomenon
which shares its root with value. Takeda says, meaning and value are "inherently
one and the same thing."[11]

The significance of this phenomenological understanding of meaning
for this paper is that our affective and emotional experiences are at the core of
our sense of reality and existence of the self. Robert C. Solomon argues:

Rather than disturbances or intrusions, these emotions, and
the passions in general, are the very core of our existence, the
system of meanings and values within which our lives either
develop and grow or starve and stagnate. The passions are the
very soul of our existence; it is not they who require the controls
and rationalizations of reason. Rather, it is reason that requires
the anchorage and earthy wisdom of the passions.[12]

Like Takeda and Solomon, the fundamental unity of meaning and value is dis-
cussed by Patočka as well. Positing that "values mean nothing other than that
being is meaningful," he states:

the point is that nothing can appear to us except in a meaning-
ful, intelligible coherence, in the framework of our openness
for the world, which means fundamentally that we are not in
the world as indifferent observers as witnesses but that being
in the world is the point of our being in its innermost sense.[13]

This "openness for the world" that discloses the world as meaningful and intel-
ligible is best described through Heideggerian concept of care.

CARE: THE INTERFACE FOR MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORLD

In Being and Time, care (Sorge) is designated as the fundamental structure of Dasein. This is in two senses: (1) it captures the existential Being of Dasein, "for which, in its Being that very Being is essentially an issue" and (2) it signifies the directedness of Dasein's Being toward the world.[14]

Care is "the totality of Dasein's structural whole,"[15] and it lies in temporality: "The being of Dasein means ahead-of-itself-being-already-in-(the-world) as being-amidst (entities encountered within-the-world). This being fills in the signification of the term 'care,' which is used in a purely ontologico-existential manner."[16] The three existential elements of being-already-in, being-amidst, and being-ahead-of-itself signify the temporality of past, present, and future. Put together, Dasein "finds itself in a world that it has not created or chosen, that Dasein has specific concerns, and that it projects itself into future states."[17] Care is the very condition for anything to matter and disclose their intelligibility. Care in this sense is like Dasein's interface for meaningful encounters with the world.

Though its etymological connections are not conveyed in English translation, Heidegger uses concern (Besorgen) as derivative concept of care that takes the purposive attitude of "in-order-to" and it is through concern the entities in the world attain their significance:

> Circumspective concern includes the understanding of a totality of involvements, and this understanding is based upon a prior understanding of the relationships of the "in-order-to", the "towards-which", the "towards-this", and the "for-the-sake-of". The interconnection of these relationships has been exhibited earlier as "significance". Their unity makes up what we call the "world".[18]

As I contrast matters of fact and matters of concern, I am incorporating the concept of concern in this Heideggerian sense. It is through care and concern we disclose the meaningfulness of the entities in the world, and their disclosures are, by definition, interested, value-laden, and existential.

FACTS: MATHEMATIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Although the idea of fact too is elusive and contested, it is commonly

understood in contrast with values. The methodologies and technologies of modern sciences systematically eliminate subjective elements in elucidating their objects of investigation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether modern sciences actually succeed in distilling objective facts without interference of values or not. However, I argue that overreliance on such a positivistic understanding of facts not only is insufficient for literacy education—which once again, is about participation in meaning-making—but it also can be detrimental and alienating for learners.

In The Crisis of European Sciences, Edmund Husserl argues that the essence of modern sciences is the mathematization of nature. Through "mathematical praxis," Husserl writes, "we attain what is denied us in empirical praxis: 'exactness'; for there is the possibility of determining the ideal shapes in absolute identity, of recognizing them as substrates of absolutely identical and methodically, univocally determinable qualities."[19] The numerical system derives its exactness from eliminating polysemy of concepts: the numbers are orderly distributed signs with equal intervals between each other and they denote only such distance. Thus, while "number one" in its conceptual use could mean "the first place in the competition," "the first priority," "the origin," and so on with certain sentiments and values associated with them, the numerical use of which cannot mean anything but its location in the system. It is through application of this system to the nature, the modern sciences enable humans to make predictions at the unprecedented level. In her book, The Crisis of Meaning and the Life-World, Ľubica Učník states,

> These "laws" are comprehensible and tenable only if nature
> is defined in terms of the equivalence of things, geometrical
> space, uniform time, and the mathematical grid that defines
> the position of bodies, without any privileged spaces, above
> or below.[20]

The great achievements of science transformed not only nature into calculable objects, but also our senses of reality and our places in it. Patočka writes:

> Given the immense, really miraculous achievements of mathe-
> matical methods in physics and natural science in general, this
> becomes the source of a new, soberly audacious view of the

whole of reality which recognizes no beings other than those
at which we arrive by such mathematical reconstruction of the
world of the senses in which we naturally move.[21]

"The reality in the strict sense, the reality of effective scientific cognition," Patočka says, "now appears as devoid of meaning."[22]

Because the mathematically abstracted reality attains its objectivity through stripping of meaning, Hannah Arendt argues, it is untranslatable to our speech and thought. When understanding of reality does not involve our interpretation, but revelation through scientific methods, it deprives us of our responsibility toward the world:

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern
sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good,
then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much
of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at
the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no
matter how murderous it is.[23]

The untranslatability of knowledge into speech is a great political concern, since it is the speech that makes humans a political being. The tyranny of scientific facts can destroy the world in a twofold sense:

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judg-
ment of scientists qua scientists is not primarily their lack
of "character"—that they did not refuse to develop atomic
weapons—or their naivete—that they did not understand that
once these weapons were developed they would be the last to
be consulted about their use—but precisely the fact that they
move in a world where speech has lost its power.[24]

Arendt posits that it is through speech that human plurality—the very condition of human freedom—appears, and without which we cannot find our lives meaningful: "Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves."[25] 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.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES: A SEARCH FOR "ULTIMATE MEANING"

Through my conceptual analysis of meaning, care, and facts, I discussed the ontological priority of the matters of concern. In what follows, I discuss conspiracy theories as a textual genre that is driven by the desire for meaning. The primacy of meaning in both literacy education and conspiracy theories illuminates why the discussion of the latter in the former should not stop at the level of matters of fact.

A conspiracy theory is defined as "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good."[26] According to this definition, making a (factually wrong) claim that vaccines cause autism is in itself not a conspiracy theory unless one also thinks that the producers and/or disseminators of vaccines are aware of this harm and still administer them to people.

Also, although in recent years conspiracy theories are often discussed under the umbrella of post-truth, it must not be confused with fake news. While fake news is fabricated in such a way to deliberately mislead or deceive the audience, conspiracy theories are usually propagated by genuine believers of those theories.

It is also important to note that the above definition does not treat conspiracy theories in a pejorative way. There are several reasons for this. Here I note two important factors. First, the term conspiracy theory is often used as a derogatory label "as a way to silence, trivialize, or demonize critics of the abuse of power."[27] Orr and Husting discuss how knowledge claims of African-Americans and Muslims have been labeled as conspiracy theories to treat them as "inherently false and absurd, illogical, and unreasonable, motivated by a delusional, angry and immoral mind."[28] However, and this is the second reason, there have been historical cases where what started as a conspiracy theory later proven to be true: the Watergate scandal, Tuskegee syphilis experiment, NSA's mass surveillance, to name a few. For these reasons, while recognizing the harmfulness of many conspiracy theories to the society, I suspend my moral judgement on conspiracy

theories as a textual genre in the following exploration.

According to Michael Barkun, there are three principles that are found in almost all conspiracy theories: (1) nothing happens by accident, (2) nothing is as it seems, and (3) everything is connected.[29] First, conspiracy theories attribute intentionality of evil-minded people to the events, and accidents and coincidence are rejected as an explanation. Second, they exhibit a high level of skepticism and take appearances to be deceptive. Third, because there is no room for accidents, they seek patterns and linkages between all events. "Assumptions such as these" Aupers and Harambam state, "are a manifestation of ultimate meaning-making: they can be understood as self-constructed 'theodicies' explaining evil and suffering in the world."[30] Conspiracy theories are a powerful meaning-bestowing device with Manichean dichotomy of good and evil.

There is no surprise, therefore, that conspiracy theories flourish during the times of anomie, understood here as the state of normlessness caused by a major historical event and/or a rapid social change.[31] Karl Popper, in his book The Open Society and Its Enemies, argues that conspiracy theories are "a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition." Through Enlightenment and "disenchantment of the world":

> The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful
> men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is
> responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned
> Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the
> imperialists.[32]

Following this line of argument, Aupers and Harambam call conspiracy theories rational re-enchantments and associate them with esotericism, New Age spirituality, social constructivism, and critical theories. With such a hotch-potch of spirituality and social scientific theories, conspiracy theories mystify the modern society: "conspiracy theories are not so much constructing 'ultimate meaning' by attributing inherent meaning to nature, but rather, in a paradoxical way, to society."[33] The uncovering of the hidden force that controls the society requires incessant interpretation. Mark Fenster states:

> Conspiracy theory demands continual interpretation. There is
> always something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the

evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that
depends on the perpetual motion of signification. Further, the
very attempt to shut interpretation down is itself a suspicious
act that requires interpretation.[34]

Unlike modern science's revelation of what things "are," conspiracy theorists seek to find what they "mean." Through paraphrasing Max Weber, Aupers and Harambam state "by constructing theories about mysterious, omnipotent powers located in the institutions of modern society, [conspiracy theorists] assert that the social world is essentially not "as it is"—"processes" do not "simply happen," but do "signify" something."[35]

No matter how spurious they seem, rationalistic debunking through presentations of facts is not an effective approach to make believers rethink their position. This is because the marginality of conspiracy theories is often the very source of their attractiveness. Tracing the genealogy of conspiracy theories' marginalization, Thalmann states:

More often than not, conspiracy theorists thus take the stig-
matization of conspiracy theory—the "debunking" or blocking
of conspiracist content—as evidence of the bias exhibited by
the mainstream media or even as a sign that the media, too,
are part of an elite conspiracy.[36]

Structurally reminiscent of Nietzschean slave morality, believers of conspiracy theories leverage their marginality to question the epistemic authority of modern institutions like media, science, and government. When an existential precariousness is the source of obduracy, a proposal of counter-evidence is seen as an attack to believers' identities.

Examination of conspiracy theories suggests that teaching of media literacy at the level of matters of fact is not sufficient. If one of their main attractions is in fact about meaning-bestowing power, media literacy education needs to respond to them at the level of matters of concern.

CONCLUSION, OR THE BLUEPRINT FOR SYNTHESIS

In the Crisis, Husserl states "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people."[37] Though modern sciences' achievements and contributions to our lives are unquestionable, scientific knowledge cannot account for

the entirety of our life-world.

Through conceptual examination of meaning, care, and facts, I discussed the ontological priority of meaning and values in the life-world. I then discussed conspiracy theories as a textual genre in which the crisis of meaning manifests as a prominent factor. Given the centrality of meaning, it is imperative for literacy education to go beyond the matters of fact and address matters of concern. This is not to suggest that efforts made in media literacy education to teach learners about fact checking, identification of information sources, evaluation of credibility, and so on are not important. They certainly are important things to teach. However, they need to be done with "care": importance of facts and objectivity should not denigrate learners' sensory, emotional, semantic, and axiological experiences.

Although the purpose of this paper is to propose an antithesis to the overreliance on scientific facts and objectivity in media literacy education, I would like to conclude the paper by sketching the blueprint for the future work of synthesis.

As I discussed, one of the major motivating factors of conspiracy theories is their capacity to offer "ultimate meaning." Going through scientific disenchantment, higher mobility and transience of culture through globalization, social isolation during the global pandemic, and so forth, the temptation to look for a system that firmly regulates meanings and values is understandable. In fact, scientism—an ideology that sees scientific knowledge as the only valid form of knowledge and thus its methods and assumptions should be extended to all realms of knowledge production—too seem to be driven by a similar desire for certainty.[38]

An important task for literacy education I claim, therefore, is to provide a space to learn about such a desire for certainty and abilities to own meanings without relying on external forces that provide the ultimate framework for meaning. What Patočka says is insightful here: "the result of the primordial shaking of accepted meaning is not a fall into meaninglessness but, on the contrary, the discovery of the possibility of achieving a freer, more demanding meaningfulness."[39]

What literacy education can offer is not a stable ground for meaning,

but its openness. This form of meaningfulness is both freer and more demanding because it is about actualization of positive freedom. We are not free to give meanings to the entities in the world whatever ways we please. To live meaningfully in a common world is to enter the world that is inhabited by others prior to one's arrival. Thus, participation in meaning-making involves negotiations against the background of norms where one needs to offer "a meaning [one has] thought through, seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for it."[40] Rather than outsourcing the ground for meaning, one's commitment and responsibility become the source of meaningful life.

1 Mordechai Gordon, "Critical Democratic Discourses, Post-Truth and Philosophy of Education," Philosophy of Education 77, no. 1 (2021): 71–85.

2 Gordon, "Critical Democratic Discourses, Post-Truth and Philosophy of Education," 82 (emphasis added).

3 Gordon, "Critical Democratic Discourses, Post-Truth and Philosophy of Education," 83.

4 Lee McIntyre, Post-Truth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 163.

5 Colin C. Barton, "Critical Literacy in the Post-Truth Media Landscape," Policy Futures in Education 17 no. 8, (2019): 1024.

6 Barton, "Critical Literacy in the Post-Truth Media Landscape," 1033.

7 Jan Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999), 53.

8 Robert Sokolowski, Introduction to Phenomenology (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

9 Angus Stevenson and Maurice Waite, eds., Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 269.

10 Seiji Takeda, Yokubōron: Dai Ikkan "Imi" No Genri Ron [Philosophy of Desire: Volume 1 a Fundamental Theory of Meaning] (Tokyo, Japan: Kōdansha, 2017), 370; my translation.

11 Takeda, Yokubōron, 27

12 Robert C. Solomon, The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), xvii.

13 Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, 56.

14 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), 117.

15 Heidegger, Being and Time, 364.

16 Here I am using Hubert Dreyfus's translation for sein bei. Heidegger, Being and Time, 237.

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19 Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 27.

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21 Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, 70.

22 Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, 71.

23 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3.

24 Arendt, The Human Condition, 4.

25 Arendt, The Human Condition, 4.

26 Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, American Conspiracy Theories (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

27 Martin Orr and Ginna Husting, "Media Marginalization of Racial mi-

norities: 'Conspiracy Theorists' in U.S. Ghettos and on the 'Arab Street'," in Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them, ed. Joseph E. Iscinski (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 82.

28 Orr and Husting, 90.

29 Michael Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

30 Stef Aupers and Jaron Harambam, "Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory Between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation," in Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion, eds. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), 61.

31 Uscinski and Parent, American Conspiracy Theories.

32 Karl Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 306.

33 Aupers and Harambam, "Rational Enchantments," 60.

34 Mark Fenster, Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 94.

35 Aupers and Harambam, "Rational Enchantments," 63.

36 Katharina Thalmann, The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish" (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 195.

37 Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences, 6.

38 Richard L. Williams, "Introduction," in Scientism: The New Orthodoxy, eds. Richard L. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1-22.

39 Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, 63.

40 Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, 60.