Polarized Truth Decay & the Role of Education in a Democracy

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the causes and dangers of truth decay for a democracy, the role education has played in the process, and how education can present a resistance to this dangerous trend. Truth decay has been characterized as an increase in quantity of opinion over fact, divergent views on what constitutes a fact, and decreased confidence of traditional sources of information. We agree that truth decay is a serious problem but would characterize it somewhat differently. Opinions, divergent views, and decreased confidence in traditional sources of information are not detrimental by themselves. Instead, we see truth decay as characterized by the abandonment of a tradition of subjecting our divergent views and opinions to critical scrutiny. We find that education needs to be deeply concerned with separating, as thoroughly as possible, true statements from falsehoods, which requires criticism. In this paper we draw attention to two phenomena that currently promote truth decay: schismogenesis and censorship. We explore how education over the past three decades has contributed to truth decay and how schismogenesis is reflected in school policies today. We conclude with suggestions and resources as to how education can present a resistance to this phenomenon.

Keywords: *truth decay, schismogenesis, democracy, education, censorship*

The purpose of this paper is to delineate the causes, workings, and dangers of truth decay for a democracy with the goal to identify the role education has played in the process and how it can present a resistance to this dangerous trend. Truth decay has been characterized by an increase in quantity of opinion over fact, divergent views on what constitutes a fact, conflation of opinion and fact, and decreased confidence of traditional sources of information (Kavanaugh & Rich, 2018). While we agree that truth decay is a serious problem, we would characterize it somewhat differently. Opinions, divergent views, and decreased confidence in traditional sources of information, in our view, are not in and of themselves detrimental. Instead, we see truth decay as characterized by the abandonment of a tradition of subjecting our divergent views and opinions to critical scrutiny. That means that education needs to be deeply concerned with separating, as thoroughly as possible, true statements from falsehoods, which requires criticism. In this paper we draw attention to two phenomena that in our view are currently undermining our tradition of criticism and hence promoting truth decay. These phenomena are (1) schismogenesis, and (2) censorship. Schismo-

genesis, which is the creation of division, is of course largely synonymous with divergent opinions/behaviors, but it is the manner in which these divergent behaviors come to be that alarms us. It is this dimension of schismogenesis that we will focus on here. Amidst schismogenesis and censorship combined with cognitive biases such as motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, new social media platforms, and 24-hour news cycles, counters to truth decay such as the teaching of critical thinking, propaganda awareness, and STEM (Hobbs, 2021; Varbelow & Yaworsky, 2023) only go so far.

In this paper, we hone in more closely on Bateson's original concept of schismogenesis. Numerous studies (Nadeem, 2019) corroborate the thesis that we live in a highly polarized era. Specifically, we are interested in examining some of the mechanisms driving polarization, such as schismogenesis, and some of the narratives in right-wing/populist and left-wing/progressive ecosystems that provoke people into action and are thus central elements in organized propaganda efforts that help drive polarization.

In the second section of this paper, we explore how education over the past three decades has contributed to truth decay and how schismogenesis is reflected in school policies today. We conclude with suggestions and resources as to how education can present a resistance to this phenomenon.

Philosophical Orientation

Before we proceed to the heart of our paper, one point that we want to state up front is that we authors come from "polarized" philosophical camps. Our anthropologist author takes a constructive empiricist stance which aims for truth about the observable sectors of reality and empirical adequacy concerning the unobservable dimensions, that is to say, the unobservable postulates used to explain the observable phenomena (van Fraassen, 1980). By contrast, our education author employs a postmodern lens to interpret the world, which critiques the Newtonian stability of modernism. At the center of postmodernism is space for Lyotardian (1984) doubt, meaning that knowledge is conditional and dependent upon social interactions within one's cultures. Postmodernism rejects the metanarrative as "the story of us" because it questions its authors—those in power. Instead, it recognizes that knowledge exists in cultural context and focuses on its sociology. For education, this means that objectivism is replaced with constructionism where students construct meaning by building new knowledge based on prior knowledge. This is done by interpreting information as it makes sense to them when placed in their singular narratives of the world and the self. It falls to the responsibility of formal education to assure that the scaffold of prior knowledge is built on hypotheses that are falsifiable (Popper, 1979). The constructed narrative, however, is singular to a person's individual interpretation of one's place in it. For example, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that the earth's temperature is rising, which makes this statement a firmly established fact. What to do with this fact, however, is open for interpretation, e.g., one can be concerned and start recycling and stop flying, or one can choose to feel impotent about it and ignore it. So, what is open for interpretation is not the fact but rather its personal meaning.

Despite the tensions inherent in our positions, we have been able to find a common ground in uniting against what we perceive to be truth decay. As fellow thinkers we meet again at Lyotard's (1984) distinction between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge whereas the latter is immune to personal interpretation. We further hypothesize that truth decay is an unexpected bifurcation of postmodernism. In other words, the social world exists in multiplicities and pluralities, which is the place where seemingly discrepant narratives exist concurrently without negating

one another. And with that comes the danger that the narratives of the few whose voices carry louder in the resulting cacophony, such as those of powerful politicians and lobbyists, are monopolizing The Truth thereby creating a new metanarrative. If this hypothesis were to have merit, schools would have the power to equip the citizenry with the skills necessary to interpret the never-ending hurricane of information and distinguish between facts, propaganda, truths, and conspiracies.

Schismogenesis

Motivated reasoning and taking cues from elites is, in our estimation, likely to be a major force in the phenomenon of schismogenesis. Bateson (1935) introduced the concept of schismogenesis and expanded on it when he defined schismogenesis as "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals," (Bateson, 1965, p. 175). He identified at least two forms of schismogenesis: (1) complementary, and (2) symmetrical. Complementary schismogenesis is characterized by an increase in divergent behavior (e.g., liberal wearing masks and getting vaccinated during the pandemic, conservatives not doing so). Symmetrical schismogenesis has more to do with increased boasting among both groups, for example, each group claiming elite status and denigrating the other group, which also leads to culture change. One process of schismogenesis we wish to concentrate on is the process in which divergent identities are formed within two groups based largely on automatic opposition to one another, and not based on thought-out, well-considered differences of opinion. Many years ago, there were two television shows worth mentioning: "Hannity and Colmes" and "Crossfire." "Hannity and Colmes" featured a conservative (Hannity) and a liberal (Colmes) debating issues of the day and criticizing one another's positions. "Crossfire" likewise featured a conservative and a liberal engaged in critical debate. Fast forward to the current media environment and we now have Hannity throwing red meat to the base without Colmes providing critical rebuttal. Similarly structured shows with liberal hosts can be found on MS Now. Crossfire has been cancelled. These newer programs illustrate how schismogenesis is operating, driving further apart already divergent identities. It is the creation of division, the creation of in-groups and out-groups. As Michael Palin (Monty Python, 1972) said with frustration during a Monty Python sketch, schismogenesis at times appears to be driven by "just contradiction."[1] For example, we see no obvious reasons why Republicans in 2020 would be less supportive of vaccines and masks than Democrats. It doesn't seem to be an inherently liberal/conservative issue like tax rates or universal health care. But once one side signaled preference for one position, the other side moved rapidly to flaunting the other point of view. That's complementary schismogenesis in a nutshell.

If this is indeed a well-entrenched dynamic in political discourse and identity formation, it's hard to see how truth decay will be arrested by simply teaching critical thinking and STEM courses, although these are of course important and part of the solution. We draw the reader's attention to those social sciences like psychology and sociocultural anthropology that investigate the nature of schismogenesis, boundary maintenance, and identity formation. Social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2010) wrote on the characteristics of boundary maintenance among socio-political groups. He found that the following four properties were prevalent: (1) over-communicating differences between groups on different sides of a boundary, (2) under-communicating

1. A sketch from Monty Python's Flying Circus (1972) illustrates this idea: Michael Palin states, "An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a definite proposition." John Cleese responds "No, it isn't."

differences within bounded groups, (3) myth creation, and (4) highlighting victimization of one's own group while demonizing other groups as needed. Alongside Eriksen, both Harari (2015) and Anderson (1983/2006) identify myth creation as a central element of in-group cohesion. While all these phenomena, alongside Durkheim's (1995) "collective effervescence," are conducive to boundary maintenance and in-group cohesion, they don't really help in the fight against truth decay. What all this suggests is that the search for truth (or empirical adequacy concerning unobservable postulates) may be central to education and science, but the search for myth is central to politics, and we should not expect myth-making to ever go away. Hence, all we can do is educate students about these dynamics so they are at least aware of them, which might give the rational side of their minds a chance to compete with the emotional (Haidt, 2011).

If schismogenesis, with one of its manifestations being the acceptance of ideas based on mere opposition and not too concerned with evidence or critical scrutiny is indeed helping to drive polarization in societies, it is understandable how such a process drives truth decay. As a counter, we contend that scholars should weigh the costs and benefits of giving unpleasant hypotheses a fair hearing, even if they contradict the preferred public relations messaging strategies of their political allies, including those considered to be vulnerable groups. And if we can explain the appeal of conspiracy theories to students and equip them with the tools to analyze critically, it may prevent them from drifting into all out belief in very dubious hypotheses.

We will now take a closer look at conspiracy theories and censorship. The reader should be aware that these phenomena afflict both coalitions (Enders et al., 2022; Goldberg, 2023).

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories may be defined as "the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent" (European Commission, 2021). Some conspiracies are real, e.g., in 1999, a Florida jury ruled that cigarette companies were guilty of conspiracy for hiding evidence of health risks associated with smoking (Charatan, 1999). Many are false, yet these false ones often have a staying power that surprises. While earlier studies (Hofstadter, 1964) suggested that conspiracies theories were more prevalent on the right, a recent study by Enders et al. (2022) found that liberals and conservatives were both prone to conspiracy theories, and neither side showed a significantly greater susceptibility. Other studies corroborate this thesis. For example, Jensen (2013) and Smallpage et al. (2017) found that belief in conspiracy theories referencing chem-trails, lizard people, the moon landing, fluoridization, and television mind control had approximately equal support among the right and left. Yet wherever their locus, conspiracy theories do proliferate and can be dangerous because they can radicalize people into violent action. One study conducted by the Public Research Institute found that 23% of Republicans agree with the quote that "the government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation," (Contreras, 2023). This compelled one believer to enter a pizza parlor wielding a firearm in search of both perpetrators and hostages. Finding none, the individual was eventually arrested without any injuries (Lancaster, 2016).

For progressive examples, note that Special Counsel Robert Mueller found no evidence for the conspiracy theory linking the Trump campaign to Russian interference in the 2016 US election, and in the 1960s some left-wing Black revolutionaries held Jews responsible for the Atlantic slave trade and other malfeasance directed at the African American community (Harper and Skyes 2023).

Some Republicans believe a conspiracy theory pushed by Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani, and others involving stories about a stolen election. This culminated in the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Congress that resulted in at least one death and numerous injuries. Attorney General Bill Barr, hand-picked by Donald Trump, stated that there was no compelling evidence of fraud on a scale to overthrow the election, that Republican election officials in both Georgia and Arizona upheld the election results, and that numerous judges dismissed Trump's claims in court for lack of evidence and related deficiencies (Balsamo, 2022; Bluestein, 2022; Durkee, 2020).

Finally, there is the belief on the right that nanobots were placed in the COVID-19 vaccines to control our thoughts and behaviors. What remains unexplained is why the government doesn't bother to put the nanobots in flu shots, tap water, or Cheerios. These examples illustrate how conspiracy theories are a currently popular, powerful method for organizing and motivating political acts that manifest truth decay. As we shall see, these conspiracy theories benefit by taking advantage of (1) the observable/unobservable distinction in our sensory apparatus, (2) the motivated reasoning, often in the form of in-group/out-group dynamics, that appears to be a universal feature of human cognition, (3) cues from partisan elites, and (4) our emotions, whether they be fear, hatred, anxiety, or sympathy. Any successful strategy to counteract truth decay will need to contend with these structural properties associated with conspiracy theories.

What Makes a Conspiracy Theory Appealing?

There are several elements that heighten the credibility of conspiracy theories. First, they appeal to our motivated reasoning, and studies show that we take cues from elite partisan sources (Enders et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories also take advantage of our sensory limitations, carefully exploiting the observable/unobservable divide. That is to say, whether liberal or conservative, religious or not, we all track observable phenomena for the most part adequately and thus generally drive safely to work each day, avoiding crashes, driving off of bridges, etc. In other words, our senses allow us to strategize and produce purposeful, goal-directed behavior. But if propagandists can fixate our imagination on unobservable postulates that purport to explain the observable phenomena, they can lead us into, to use van Fraassen's (2008) phrase, an "enchanted forest." Conspiracy theories are rife with the unobservable, yet their adherents seem to wade into the forest without any worries. Conspiracies are generally conceived of as being shadowy events, shrouded in secrecy. Thus, even with no direct observation of nanobots in our vaccines, folks stealing elections, or government-affiliated Satanists abusing children, adherents show little in the way of skepticism and much in the way of belief. It's an inflationary form of metaphysics that contradicts an empirical stance.

Why do conspiracy theories seem natural, and why do people's imaginations run rampant? Stewart Guthrie (1995) has argued that we have a hyper-active agency detection module in our brains that predisposes us to see intentional behavior in innocuous things, such as faces in the clouds or mistaking wind blowing through the leaves for a dangerous animal. According to Guthrie, such an adaptation would dissuade people from wandering into a thicket with moving branches by providing the mildest of paranoia and caution: "It's just the wind" would be replaced with the thought "it could be an enemy warrior or a tiger." Better safe than sorry. In Guthrie's formulation, David Hume's (1776/1957) idea of religion as anthropomorphism is combined with a variation on Pascal's hedging (1680/1975) and evolutionary theory to interpret ambiguous phenomena as potential threats. Conspiracy theories seem to be understandable from Guthrie's position. Pascal Boyer (2001) makes related points about our cognition: mildly counterintuitive points—such as

Trump is JFK in disguise, nanobots control our thoughts - capture the imagination and are memorable; hence, they proliferate quite well. This form of in-group/out-group psychology and the demonization of enemies are strategies straight out of the U.S. Department of the Army's Field Manual on Psychological Operations (1987). It is an example of how elites cue audiences to alter their behavior to achieve desired ends.[2] All of these elements make conspiracy theories understandable, and thus teachable, from an educator's point of view.

Censorship

Censorship is a problem that affects both coalitions. Regarding censorship in higher education, survey research by Horowitz et al. (2023) suggests that large numbers of scholars are currently self-censoring. This is hampering the honest evaluation of competing points of view, thus augmenting truth decay. Why scholars are self-censoring is not too difficult to ascertain: many scholars state that they fear career repercussions (Clark et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2023; Horowitz et al., 2023). In extreme cases, scholars can even be threatened with physical violence. For example, when Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer (2000) put forth the unpleasant hypothesis that rape may be an evolutionary adaptation, some progressives were so outraged that they made death threats against Thornhill who was consequently assigned a personal bodyguard while on campus (Dreger, 2015). A similar effect was brought about by J. Michael Bailey's (2003) *The Man Who Would be Queen*, which delved into the reasons people transition. Bailey's hypotheses that sexual orientation had much to do with transgender transition decisions upset many in the progressive community who were more interested at the time in the "female brain trapped within a male body" messaging, and this led to similar threats (Dreger, 2015). In our polarized environment it's not savvy to entertain controversial notions. These examples point out the need for educators to question if students are taught not only the emotional appeal of conspiracy theories, but also the ability to compose measured responses to unpopular hypotheses that are bound to pop up in the social sciences, education, and daily life.

Well intentioned, pro-social motives have been documented to be a key reason scholars, editors, and reviewers in the USA censor manuscripts with research findings that are potentially harmful to historically disadvantaged groups (Liu & Ditto, 2013; Clark et al, 2023). For example, we remember an incident when a journal rejected a manuscript one of us co-authored concerning politics in Guerrero, Mexico. One reviewer who recommended rejection argued that our analysis was "disrespectful" to Indigenous communities. The reviewer was apparently upset because we had argued that Indigenous community members in the region, much like people in Mestizo communities, routinely activated patron-client ties to maneuver for advantage. The reviewer did not argue that our hypothesis was false, just that it was disrespectful. Similarly, the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 2023) announced that a conference session about the utility of the concept of biological sexes was cancelled due to it being viewed as likely to cause harm to the Trans and LGBTQI communities (Kinkade, A.E., 2023). The AAA also noted that this cancellation

2. One of the authors of this paper is a U.S. Army veteran who served in a psychological operations battalion that was active in 1980s Latin America and experienced first-hand the procedures for and results of creating propaganda and attempting to manipulate target audience behavior. Much of military psychological operations focuses on the creation of schismogenesis (in-group/outgroup in military terminology) and assessing vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of potential audiences.

was not a suppression of academic freedom since they were not a degree granting institution but merely a professional organization (Patel, 2023).

On February 14, 2025, the Trump administration banned the Associated Press from the Oval Office and Air Force One for using the phrase "Gulf of Mexico" (Stelter 2025). Conservatives have also frequently attempted to ban books such as "Slaughterhouse Five," "The Handmaiden's Tale," and "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" from libraries. These examples show that censorship is popular on both the left and right ends of the spectrum.

Research indicates that compared to conservatives, scholars with egalitarian/progressive sympathies are more prone to censor information potentially harmful to minority groups (Moss & O'Connor, 2020). We observe that disrespect and harm are fairly elastic concepts that can be extended to include cases where scholarly articles merely contradict the preferred public relations/messaging strategies of special interest groups. In sum, whatever potential benefits accrue to vulnerable groups due to censorship should be weighed against the notion that censoring evidence or arguments presented in good faith will likely produce a body of literature marked by increasing levels of truth decay. A good theory can survive criticism. Criticism is how we examine theories, and if we exempt certain ideas from critical scrutiny, we grant them a form of impunity.[3] Inconvenient views are censored, and threats to career precipitate further self-censoring among scholars. Clark et al. (2023) state an alternative to outright censorship would be to publish more "forum" style articles, in which a controversial paper can be published alongside commentaries from other scholars and an opportunity for the author to leave a reply. They also call for more transparency in the decision-making process used when rejecting and accepting manuscripts.

All we can add is that all of us should renew our appreciation for free speech. Scholar Alice Dreger quit her job at Northwestern University in protest against academic censorship directed by administration financial/public relations interests (Dreger, 2015).[4] Dreger (2015) argued forcefully that all of us can, and should, strive to do better in combatting truth decay. We tend to agree with her.

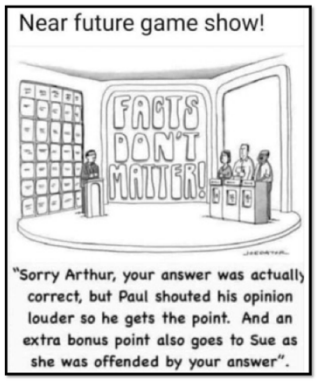
How Did We Get Here—The Role of Education in Truth Decay

Marked by disagreement over topics for which reasonably definitive data exists, this is not the first time we find ourselves experiencing truth decay. Kavanagh and Rich (2018) identified the present as the fourth period of truth decay. The first era was the Golden Age of the 1880s-1890s, which was driven by the invention of printing technology. This facilitated access to information resulting in competition among news outlets. One effect of the increased competition was "yellow journalism," which was a sensationalist way of covering events aimed at increasing sales. The second wave was the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression in the 1920s-1930s. During this time, the distribution of information was lifted from paper when radio broadcasting of news began. This feature undergirded the sensationalist style of journalism as the focus of news shifted from

3. The replication crisis that has plagued psychology and related clinical studies demonstrates that science, too, has its methodological crises and biases. Still, criticism, which science provides, is better than censorship, which admits no criticism. For further discussion on the replication crisis and the shortcomings of peer review, see gwern.net (2021).

4. We should also mention that watering down standards and inflating grades was widely reported by respondents in the recent Horowitz, Haynor, and Kickham (2023) survey of higher education departments because these occurrences are probably not helping to defeat truth decay. Corporatization of the university brings with it another set of truth decayers.

reliable information to public figures and celebrities. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s-1970s was identified as the third wave. During that time, the U.S. fought a controversial war in Vietnam, which was broadcast on television. Kavanagh and Rich (2018) assert that this exacerbated the importance of opinion over fact since moving pictures appeal directly to emotions and can therefore be easily used as a tool for manipulation.



(Xatepex, 2022)

The current wave differs from the previous three by the way in which information is available independently from traditional news sources 24/7 at our phones and with no distinction between vetted information or facts and opinions. In order to survive in a massively competitive market, media today is driven by a cut-throat business model where what matters most is the number of viewers rather than the content. This determines what news is presented, by whom, and in which manner, based on whatever keeps people tuned in, and nothing achieves that more effectively than emotionally charged and subjective content presented in such a manner. This kind of media presentation and consumption resembles a reiterative cycle with increasing influence of opinion over fact based on personal, anecdotal experiences as trust in traditional media outlets continues to decline. Rauch (2021) points out that modern state-sponsored propagandists intentionally flood social media with falsehoods in order to demoralize and confuse target audiences.

At the same time, this changed media landscape exacerbates confirmation bias because of the ease with which people can find information that supports their views while effortlessly avoiding any information that might challenge them. This is in part caused by the overwhelming amount of information – it's much easier and emotionally more comfortable to find information that bolsters existing views than to analyze massive amounts of facts and falsehoods to rethink one's ideas critically. Search algorithms that create self-enforcing feeds make sure of that.

The Past Three Decades of Kindergarten-12th Grade Education

Since truth decay is a fundamental threat to a democratic society, it falls to education to prepare a citizenry that is able to distinguish between fact and opinion, that is capable to think critically, and that is open-minded enough to question one's beliefs. But competing demands on teachers hinder effective education toward critical thinking. First, teachers and administrators are held accountable for standardized test scores, which do not necessarily evaluate critical thinking abilities. And second, the education system has been reduced to a political tool (Varbelow & Yaworsky, 2023) where powerful politicians pass legislation that effectively ties teachers' hands regarding which topics and which books they're allowed to talk or be silent about.

And yet, propaganda education is addressed less in schools today than it was in the 1940s (Hobbs, 2021). To create educational guidelines for standards across states, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were introduced in 2010. These standards are primarily aligned with mathematics and English language arts and reading skills, and while they have a critical thinking component, they are only loosely connected to the ideas of inquiry and democratic decision-making, which are central to the College, Career, and Civics Life (C3) Framework. For example, CCSS prioritize argumentation, which originally was a much-needed change from the concentration on persuasion in the standardized tests of the 1990s. Argumentation focuses on the merit of an argument, but as taught in the CCSS, it concentrates on only one of the three aspects of an argument, namely logos

or reason. This is insufficient in times when propaganda is rampant. CCSS analyze neither pathos, which uncovers the planned emotional draw of an argument that is so fundamental to propaganda, nor ethos, which is the purpose and the authority of the author. If youths do not learn how to distinguish between authority and authenticity, they might adopt a bandwagon approach and follow those whose voices are louder, e.g. celebrities, or those whose voices are more authoritative, e.g. the textbooks.

Further, the way in which CCSS require students to learn to distinguish between fact and opinion is often done as an either-or approach where students simply sort statements by whether they are true and can be proven (facts) or whether they are opinions (beliefs) (Hobbs, 2021). When reducing a phenomenon to a dichotomy, students do not learn to think about issues in complex terms, which are often closer to a truth. At the same time, during a cognitive process that involves criticality, opinions are likely to be devalued and discounted. As a result, the importance that opinions and beliefs have in people's decision-making is diminished. A better approach to preparing students to become contributing members to a democratic society would be to incorporate C3 principles to the CCSS and other areas of the curriculum such as the core STEM subjects assessed in standardized state tests but also in non-core subjects like foreign languages. If this were to be done successfully, limitations currently experienced by social studies teachers would have to be considered. For example, Thacker et al. (2017) found that social studies teachers did not incorporate inquiry as much as they felt was necessary because they lacked time and resources and felt restricted by standardized testing.

Hobbs (2021) speculates one reason that the study of propaganda is absent from the k-12 standards is because it's not a skill tested on SAT tests. College writing is usually dense, academic, and neutral. College readiness does not include the skill to analyze the complexity in propaganda or one's proficiency for inquiry and democratic decision-making. As a result, a proper study of propaganda has been neglected for three decades, and not just any decades but those of the birth and the evolution of the internet, which is presently culminating in artificial intelligence.

The CCSS were conceived of as a solution to solve the problem of unequal standards among the states and raise the bar for the education of America's child. The opposite, however, is the case. Data shows that SAT and ACT scores, which test CCSS but hardly the C3 Framework, are directly related to parental income. Research of test scores of the 2010s shows that 33% of children whose families were in the top 20% of earners were seven times more likely to score a 1300 on the SAT or a 29 on the ACT compared with children in the bottom 20% of earners; the gap for the top and bottom 1% of earners was a 13 times likelihood (Cain Miller, 2023). This is caused by wealthy parents' ability to spend large amounts of money simply on test preparation such as materials, courses, and private tutors in addition to providing a better out-of-school education. For example, upper middle-class children are more likely to be raised by two parents who make learning experiences like travel or field trips to museums and the theatre possible while lower middle-class children are more likely to grow up with extended family and in impoverished neighborhoods. As a result, children of wealthy parents are better prepared for college, to get accepted into elite universities, and have a better chance to receive scholarships, which are directly tied to test scores. While the SAT and ACT provide some data on students' current reading, writing, and mathematical abilities, they are not useful indicators of a well-rounded education. Newkirk (2013) likens the situation to having pharmaceutical companies write health standards because the authors of the standards, the major college testing agencies such as the College Board and the ACT, were engaged in determining them, which then aligned with their testing instruments.

Testing standards, which dictate what kids learn, are out of focus with students' needs and the realities of the world they live in. For example, already in 2008, Newkirk noted that kids failed to develop the grit to read complex texts around middle school and began instead to resort to spark notes. Today's social media landscape, which communicates in short, easily digestible soundbites, facilitates kids' lack of motivation to engage with complex readings. While one goal of the CCSS is for kids to read more complex texts in order to increase their college readiness, they fail to address the process of acquiring the skills needed to actually engage with such texts because those skills are not something that can be assessed in standardized tests.

For instance, students are taught to leave emotions out when reading a text and to focus solely on content. This is not a natural way to engage with any text. All aspects of an argument - logos, ethos, and pathos—are deeply human and a fundamental part of the meaning-making process. Humans know the world in difference (Bateson, 2002). Hence, to purposefully suppress all prior knowledge, which comes from one's interpretation of experiences, is unnatural and counterproductive to how humans understand the world. Kids are left with large amounts of information, either interpreted in the gospel of textbooks or uninterpreted on TikTok and X, in an education system that teaches rote learning and memorization but rarely meaning-making and the construction of knowledge. It comes as no surprise that, amidst the way education has been approached for the past three decades, we find ourselves in the fourth wave of truth decay.

Finally, a word about how postmodernism in education may have facilitated truth decay. We began our paper by noting that our education author views and interprets the world through a postmodern lens, which, in education, employs a constructionist approach to teaching and learning. She teaches based on the premises that learning is the construction of new knowledge based on prior knowledge. Knowledge is personal because we know the world through experiences. The way we make meaning of experiences is through interpretations of events whose significance and emotional and cognitive connections we determine in our individual narratives that both reflect and create our identity. This is different from the objectivist paradigm of modernism, which allows only logic rather than experiential knowledge to direct the creation of meaning. But is interpretation based on one's personal understanding of the world not the very definition of conspiratorial thinking?

While postmodernism is impossible to define, one fundamental premises is the incredulity of the grand narrative. With that it makes room for diverse perspective and narratives, which do not negate each other but exist simultaneously, adding information to the whole by illuminating different aspects. Postmodernism criticizes the univocity of meaning, but it does not indulge the distortion of facts. For example, if Floridian law makers claim that slavery offered the development of skills that can be useful (Álvarez, 2023), it's a justification and not one aspect of the whole. Postmodernism is not ambiguous to untruths. It merely acknowledges that scientific and narrative knowledge exist simultaneously and interact with one another. Lyotard (1979/1984) states that the way postmodernism approaches epistemology "should not be accorded predictive value in relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to the questions raised" (p. 7). The point is to think about how knowledge evolves. The question that must be raised then is why Floridian lawmakers create distorted versions of history. What is their agenda?

Whether proponent or opponent of postmodernism, it undoubtedly contributed to today's perfect storm: unvetted information available to all 24/7, political polarization nationally and globally, postmodern approaches to epistemology, and a citizenry that has been ill-prepared since the lid of Pandora's Box has been lifted and released the "curses" of overpopulation, limited resources, the internet, and AI upon mankind. The metaphor is a cautionary tale about human curiosity, which

is a driver for evolution and therefore must be acknowledged and dealt with. Perhaps, if we start educating people by giving them the tools to do so, we can come out of the perfect storm on a higher level.

Schools Today

So why don't we? Why don't we just teach kids about propaganda, the appeal and fallacy of conspiratorial thinking, and the workings of schismogenesis? Classrooms and schools are fractals—self-similar patterns across different scales—which mirror the society they are part of (Varbelow, 2008). As such, educational institutions have always been a realm where ideology and critical thinking compete. On the one hand, teachers want to just teach, which ultimately means to help youths along their journey to become their own person. On the other hand, they find themselves part of a system that severely limits their ability to do so.

As we showed throughout this paper, our society at present is driven by schismogenesis and censorship. In education this trend is evidenced by numerous house- and senate bills that have recently been passed across the nation specifically targeting race and gender equality, parental overview, library control, and race education. In general, these bills prohibit teachers from talking about anything remotely related to the conservative interpretation of critical race theory while giving parents the power to directly determine their child's curriculum. Parents constitute an important stakeholder of the education system, and their voices must be part of the conversation. But there are other stakeholders, like students, teachers, and less vocal parents. The case of book banning illustrates how these bills empower a highly engaged minority to determine the curriculum for all kids. In the 2021-2022 school year, a total of 1,065 complaints to remove books from school libraries were filed (Natanson, 2023). Nearly two thirds of those were filed by just 11 people. This is because ideologically motivated parents, e.g. Moms for Liberty, organize groups of volunteers to do the library searches and then file in bulk. This kind of censorship is predominantly driven by ideologues. Common concerns voiced by these parents are that those books will lead their children to think that they are gay or that it is ok to be gay (Natanson, 2023). If a few overzealous parents are given the power to hold a veto over the curriculum, other stakeholders are disempowered.

A side effect of this trend is that students' trust in teachers is declining (Merod, 2021; Natanson, 2022). As the distrust in traditional media grows while students are being warned to be cautious with online resources, the academic aspects of school have become estranged from their lives. Much of what is going on in the current polarized climate where families are split by partisanship cannot be talked about in school. Teachers are met with cognitive bias and sorted into "woke" and "MAGA" by engaged parents and present part of some authority that cannot be trusted by students.

While the obvious goal of such actions is to determine what is and is not taught, another goal is to create a chill effect. The message is that it is safer to be silent. The question about the place of religion in school illustrates this. For example, in Oklahoma, the Bible is incorporated as an instructional material while Louisiana recently passed a bill demanding that schools and universities display the Ten Commandments. When Louisiana's governor Jeff Landry was asked whether he is concerned with the separation of state and church, he replied, "I can't wait to be sued," (Hawkins, 2024). In other words, he challenges anyone who doesn't support a conservative, Christian ideology to dare to oppose him and the power his office represents.

Teachers are threatened with losing their job and their license simply by engaging in difficult conversations or making lessons relevant, e.g., by connecting a lesson on the Civil Rights

Movement to the Black Lives Matter movement. As politics empower a censorship-minded, outspoken minority to scrutinize teachers, the four-year education degree and the preparation to actually teach is devalued; critical thinking is suppressed. The realities of today's classrooms suffocate intrinsic motivation, which results in an ever-increasing nation-wide teacher shortage.

The bottom line is that for teachers, parents, and students, the public education system no longer represents a body of truth. So how can we change direction before we end up where we are headed with this trend?

Teacher Education Programs as a Path of Resistance to Truth Decay

While university professors are not immune to the policies and politics driven by schismogenesis and censorship, they have significantly more academic freedom than k-12 teachers. Therefore, they play a fundamental role in preparing their future colleagues to feel confident to be aware of and combat truth decay in youths. Many novice teachers express that they feel underprepared entering an education system that is steered by the current political climate (Castro et al., 2025). The reasons for that are manifold: one, they are the graduates of the education system that contributed to the ill-prepared citizenry as delineated in the previous section. Two, traditional novice teachers are still very young and have not yet made sufficient life and classroom experiences to become fully mature in their individual- and their teacher-personhood. And finally, young teachers express that their teacher education programs did not prepare them to do what they came for in a system that severely limits their ability to make academic decisions without endangering their professional livelihood.

While we would like to suggest that teacher education programs include courses on media literacy, propaganda, etc., this is not practical. Degree plans leave no room for extra courses, and existing programs are not likely to change their requirements, especially if it takes away from certification test preparation. But we would like to conclude our paper with tangible, practical takeaways. We have identified three dimensions fundamental to better prepare teachers to help with the resistance to truth decay that can easily be incorporated into existing education courses. The most fundamental one is media literacy, which presupposes the other two, namely, becoming aware of one's biases, and understanding what it means to be part of the authoritative discourse.

Media Literacy

There is a plethora of research delineating the importance of media literacy to resist truth decay (Huguet et al., 2019; McGrew et al., 2018; Ranschaert, 2020). Currently, students are barely able to evaluate more than the veracity of a source, which is nonetheless an important first step. What stands out from the literature are three main aspects: the importance of teaching media literacy on a large scale, teaching it in a context-embedded fashion, and doing so in a non-partisan manner. This is especially practical when done through secondary methods courses. In these courses, aspiring middle- and high school teachers learn how to design relevant and engaging lessons. An easy way to include the teaching of media literacy is by creating lesson plan assignments[5] where teacher candidates are asked to teach media literacy in their content areas, such as ELAR, history, life sciences, agriculture, etc. Incorporating media literacy into methods courses addresses the fact that it is more effective when taught in a context-embedded way since secondary teachers

5. A useful list of resources can be downloaded for free from this link: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3050.html.

design those lessons in their content areas. It is also important to help teacher candidates incorporate into these lessons media that they and their future students are familiar with and use on a daily basis, e.g. social media. The need for scale is potentially addressed when 7-12 grade students are exposed to media literacy education in many subject areas.

The third aspect—teaching media literacy in a non-partisan manner—entails talking about charged issues and using those to challenge students to include sources from across the political spectrum. The point here is not to provide students with answers but with guidance, for example, in the form of classroom conversations where students raise their own questions and issues are explored deeply, critically, and in their complexity.

The assessment of media literacy skills remains a challenge, which is also a reason it is not easily integrated in k-16 education. Assessment cannot be limited to checking if students use the skills accurately. Rather, it must focus on how and whether they apply what they have learned in daily life. It is a life skill or better, a way of thinking about the world that goes beyond dichotomies and axiomatic assumptions. And this presupposes one's awareness of and reconciliation with one's own biases.

Becoming Aware of One's Biases

If we want our future colleagues to teach in a non-partisan, unbiased way, it is essential to make them aware of the fact that we are all bigots in some way because all of us prejudge people and issues on something. This is an uncomfortable truth that is part of the human condition. Since we cannot just turn it off, our best chance is to become aware of our biases so we can respond thoughtfully regarding what to do with them rather than react emotionally.

Our first author uses an experiential learning experience to achieve that. The Bias Project (Varbelow, 2019) is designed to make students comfortable with the fact that, as humans, they are innately biased. In this four-step process, students first become aware of this truth in themselves and of their own biases. They then compose four conversation questions that follow guidelines for qualitative research interviews before getting together with a relative or acquaintance who embodies their bias. Common topics they choose to explore include their preferences for presidential candidates, pro-life/pro-choice, transgender issues, and homo-/heterosexuality. After their conversation, students are asked to compose a first-person narrative from the Other's point of view. The final part of the project is a reflection in which students think through whether/how this experience has influenced their relationship with the Other and what this means about human relationships. The most important insight aspiring teachers gain is that humans are inherently biased toward or against something, which makes it challenging to resist confirmation bias and truth decay. This is a fundamental realization for an educator who is about to be charged to teach these concepts in an unbiased way.

Being Part of the Authoritative Discourse

By the time a novice teacher enters their first classroom, they have been on the other side of the teacher's desk for 16+ years. For at least 12 of those years, they have been a near passive recipient of authority. Even during their college years, they have tried to "figure out the professor" and what they want, always keeping an eye on their course grades, GPA, and chances for scholarships. Based on the lead author's experiences with teacher candidates over the past 17 years, students come to teacher education programs thinking that they will teach just their content area. They

come to teacher education programs thinking that they will teach just their content area. They do not yet realize that once they enter the classroom as a teacher, they will have become part of the authoritative discourse, whether they are comfortable with that fact or not. Students will perceive them as such just like they did their teachers and professors. This means they have to re-think their idea of themselves. Even if students' trust in teachers is declining, a good teacher will form relationships with their students, and the latter will undoubtedly be curious about how their teacher navigates life, which includes their take on difficult issues. And the more sincere a teacher is, the more trustworthy they are for their students. Therefore, teacher education programs must prepare candidates for the realities of the classroom, which is teaching in a test-driven environment while still being able to do what drove them to the profession. This means that they have to find their "north star," in other words, clarify for themselves why they want to be a teacher and what their beliefs about the purpose of school for the individual and for society are. And they must have thought about "how school is done" today, which includes reflecting on difficult phenomena like school shootings, book banning, a massive teacher and administrator exodus, etc. The goal is for teacher candidates to find the space where they can be true to themselves while keeping a foot in the door, so to speak.

Many professors of education probably already implement this idea in their foundations courses. Our lead author does it through a series of "Expert Panels" where students select a charged topic in education like those listed above and two peer-colleagues with whom they research this topic to become "experts." This is then presented in a fashion not unlike the talk shows featured on common TV media (see "The Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC or "The Five" on Fox News). The "experts" begin by having a conversation among themselves about the topic during which they illustrate the different facets of the issue before opening the floor to the "audience," which is the rest of the class, for questions and engagement. It is preferable for a group of experts to come from different viewpoints on the topic because this makes the conversation more nuanced while modeling true conversation rather than argumentation for the "audience." Since our lead author uses the question "Why school??" as the foundation for the entire course, each expert panel seminar concludes with individual reflections about the issue, about how their take fits in the bigger picture in relation to their "colleagues'" thinking, and what it means for their personal answers to the fundamental course question. Assessment is once again difficult because it is not a skill that is assessed but rather a complex and critical way of thinking about the world and one's place in it.

But if teacher education programs include versions of all three dimensions—media literacy, bias, and being part of the authoritative discourse—the possibility of creating resistance to truth decay is real.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to understand the mechanisms of schismogenesis and censorship as the underpinnings of the current wave of truth decay. We have shown how education has played a role in setting up conditions for the present situation. We believe that education is the bedrock of democracy. And while public education has significantly contributed to truth decay and so to the endangerment of democracy, we believe that it also contains the possibility for its future. A quote often attributed to the physicist Niels Bohr comes to mind: "Every great and deep difficulty bears in itself its own solution. It forces us to change our thinking in order to find it." This is not the first time we find ourselves in a situation where truth and epistemology are manipulated. Our world is nuanced, multi-faceted, complex, and discrepant, so it will not be the

last time. We hope that understanding the causes and workings of this phenomenon will contribute to the search for finding a path to resist it.

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