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2. AN EDUCATOR'S PRIMER

Fake News, Post-Truth, and a Critical Free Press

INTRODUCTION

Being an educator at any level—K-12 through undergraduate and graduate education—has always been a challenge in the U.S. since formal education *in theory* is linked to preserving our democracy. Being a critical educator at any level in the U.S. has always been and remains nearly impossible because formal education *in practice* is more about enculturation and maintaining the status quo than seeking the social equity that remains elusive despite our claimed ideals as a people.

With the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016, the media punditry has become obsessed, as has Trump, with fake news and post-truth public discourse. In this volume committed to investigating and interrogating fake news and post-truth discourse in the context of curriculum and instruction grounded in critical media literacy goals, below we offer the foundational opportunity for educators to consider and reconsider the nature of truth/Truth, knowledge, and facts both in the teaching/learning dynamic and throughout mainstream media and all sorts of public discourse, notably by and about political discourse.

First, let's establish the terms and contexts essential to understanding and then teaching *critical media literacy*:

- “Fake news” is a technical term (although most public discourse fails to adhere to this technical distinction) that identifies mostly on-line information that is intentionally false and provocative, designed to be click-bait and drive internet traffic and thus revenue.
- “Satire” is purposefully distorted information that assumes readers/viewers recognize the information is not factual, but intended to make larger points. *The Onion*, Saturday Night Live's *Weekend Update*, *The Daily Show*, and John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* are examples of satire packaged in seemingly credible formats, parodies of traditional news media.
- “Post-truth” is a relatively newer term for the popular and often right-wing embracing of (and misunderstanding) post-modernism's challenge to the objective nature of truth/Truth. Not to oversimplify, but post-modernism argues that truth/Truth is defined by whoever is in power (not an objective reality), while

the contemporary popular and right-leaning political embracing of “post-truth” is more akin to “the truth is whatever I say it is regardless of any evidence or the credibility of evidence.”

- Mainstream journalism functions under two important and corrupting norms: (1) journalists (just as educators are implored to be) maintain a stance of objectivity and neutrality, an apolitical pose, and thus (2) most mainstream examinations of topics, debates, and events are framed as “both sides” journalism, rendering all positions as equally credible and valid. For example, the mainstream media, as John Oliver has exposed, gives the general public the false notion that climate change has as many scientists for as against the “theory,” a term read by the public as “hypothesis.”

As noted parenthetically above, to embrace teaching critical media literacy (in conjunction with critical pedagogy and critical literacy) is disrupting the traditional norm that educators remain apolitical. This volume’s authors recognize that educators face tremendous hurdles for teaching critical media literacy: eroding job security with the dismantling of unions (and absence historically of unions in many regions of the U.S.), increasing accountability for student test scores on exams that are reductive and demand of students far less in their literacy than critical media literacy (in other words, our efforts to teach critical media literacy can be disregarded with “that isn’t on the test”), and deteriorating teaching and learning conditions such as overcrowded classrooms and more teachers inadequately prepared to teach (such as Teach For America candidates).

None the less, if we genuinely believe in universal public education as a key mechanism for democracy and individual liberty then we educators must be well versed in critical media literacy, and then we must make that central to our classrooms. Throughout this chapter, the intersections of media and education are examined in order to highlight the power and dangers inherent in fake news, post-truth discourse, and traditional calls for educators and journalists to be objective, apolitical.

MAINSTREAM MEDIA, NOT FAKE NEWS, SPAWNED POST-TRUTH DISCOURSE

Journalist Sarah Kendzior (2016) confronts the histrionics about fake news are distracting us from a very real and very ugly truth echoed by Hedges (2016): having crossed the Bigfoot line (see below), mainstream media, not fake news, spawned post-truth discourse. Let me illustrate.

Consider the lede from “Woman A Leading Authority On What Shouldn’t Be In Poor People’s Grocery Carts” (2014):

With her remarkable ability to determine exactly how others should be allocating their limited resources for food, local woman Carol Gaither is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on what poor people should and should not have in their grocery carts, sources said Thursday.

From 2014, this is satire from *The Onion*, a publication often *confused* for fake news, although satire has not the malicious intent of the more recent purposefully placed fake news designed to be click-bait and make money (Shane, 2017).

What this satirizes, however, is incredibly important since it challenges the mostly misguided and nasty stereotypes (Gorski, 2013) that many if not most Americans *believe* about people who are poor: it is the fault of the poor, laziness, that they are impoverished, and thus, they do not deserve the same material pleasures hard working people do deserve (as in luxuries such as sweets). We might argue that no reasonable person would believe a story from *The Onion* to be true, but it happens (Mackey, 2015), and well before all the hand-wringing about fake news and presidential politics.

Yet, what is far more disturbing is that despite concurrent charges the sky is falling because the expert is dead, the U.S. still functions with an expert class of media, the primary cable news networks such as Fox and CNN as well as the last surviving newspapers, notably *The New York Times*. While many reject the “liberal media,” most people remain solidly faithful that the NYT is reporting credibly. And here is the problem: the NYT and mainstream media are overwhelmingly meeting the standards of mainstream media, and those standards of “both sides” and objective journalism are far more harmful and dangerous than fake news.

For example, just one week before Trump’s inauguration, the NYT published “In the Shopping Cart of a Food Stamp Household: Lots of Soda” (O’Connor, 2017), which in only a few days prompted this from state government:

A lawmaker in Tennessee wants to ban people from using food stamps to buy items that have no nutritional value. The bill was proposed by Republican Rep. Sheila Butt.¹...House Bill 43 would prohibit people from using food stamps to purchase items high in calories, sugar or fat, according to the Tennessean. That would include soda, ice cream, candy, cookies and cake. (Padilla, 2017)

However, there is more *indirect* truth in the satirical *The Onion* article than in the NYT article, as Joe Soss (2017) reports:

In a New York Times story over the weekend, Anahad O’Connor massages and misreports a USDA study to reinforce some of the worst stereotypes about food stamps. For his trouble, the editors placed it on the front page. Readers of the newspaper of record learn that the end result of tax dollars spent on food assistance is a grocery cart full of soda. No exaggeration. The inside headline for the story is “What’s in the Shopping Cart of a Food Stamp Household? Lots of Sugary Soda,” and the front-page illustration shows a shopping cart containing almost nothing but two-liter pop bottles.

Yes, the key words above are “misreports” and “stereotypes.” Soss explains:

Let’s be clear here: this is nonsense. It’s a political hack job against a program that helps millions of Americans feed themselves, and we should all be

outraged that the New York Times has disguised it as a piece of factual news reporting on its front page.

There are two major problems here. First, O'Connor misrepresents the findings of the USDA report. Second, O'Connor's article is a case study in the dark arts of making biased reporting appear even-handed. Let's start with the facts.

Not as sexy, and not what the general public believes, the USDA report actually has a much different message:

A November 2016 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture examined the food shopping patterns of American households who currently receive nutrition assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) compared with those not receiving aid. Its central finding? "There were no major differences in the expenditure patterns of SNAP and non-SNAP households, no matter how the data were categorized." (Vallas & Robbins, 2017)

Vallas and Robins note as well that the NYT/O'Connor misreporting is about more than feeding misguided stereotypes about people in poverty:

Beyond the article's inaccuracies, there is a broader problem with this kind of reporting. It reinforces an "us versus them" narrative—as though "the poor" are a stagnant class of Americans permanently dependent on aid programs. The New York Times' own past reporting has shown that this simply isn't the case. Research by Mark Rank, which the paper featured in 2013, shows that four in five Americans will face at least a year of significant economic insecurity during their working years. And analysis by the White House Council on Economic Advisers finds that 70 percent of Americans will turn to a means-tested safety net program such as nutrition assistance at some point during their lives.

Now if we return to our concern about the rise of fake news and the death of the expert, we should be confronting a couple far more pressing facts ourselves as educators and then with our students:

- Mainstream media are mostly conducting press-release journalism, often bending to the market and not reaching for truth, justice, and the American way; and fail our democracy because of traditional norms of objectivity and "both sides" journalism.
- The public in the U.S. is not anti-expert, but seeking the *appearance* of expertise that confirms what they already believe²—even when what they believe lacks credibility, or worse (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.).

Maybe we have a really ugly paradox here also: publications like *The Onion* and satirical programming such as work by John Oliver and Saturday Night Live are serving the American public and the ideal of democracy and freedom far better than even the so-called best mainstream media are doing. Satirists are not bound

to simplistic conventions of objectivity (ironically, to be neutral is to endorse the status quo), and are critical instead. Journalists refuse to embrace the power of a critical free press (see below), and thus, are eager to blame fake news, to use it as a distraction.

Finally, then, we must wonder if O'Connor merely cribbed his NYT expose from *The Onion*, where three years ago they offered as satire:

"All that junk she's buying is just loaded with sugar, too," said Gaither, identifying with uncanny speed another critical flaw in her fellow shopper's grocery selection. "No wonder her kids are acting out like that." ... "The other day, I saw a woman who bought a box of name-brand Frosted Flakes because, apparently, the generic kind wasn't fancy enough for her," said Gaither, swiftly and decisively calculating that bagged cereal would have cost half as much. "And guess who's going to be paying the difference in the end?"

A speculation that does make sense because reading *The Onion* is far more entertaining and informative than plowing through a government report.

WHEN FAKE IS REAL AND REAL IS FAKE: ON CROSSING THE BIGFOOT LINE

Against the current focus on fake news and post-truth public discourse, and the renewed interest in postmodernism renamed "post-truth," human reality and facts are far more tenuous than we tend to admit in our day-to-day lives, and in our classrooms. $2 + 2 = 4$ seems obvious and above any politics, but this formula is, in fact, relative to a base-10 math system, and that system has to be instilled and preserved by some power structure. Yet, as some of the garbled efforts to co-opt postmodernism has shown, while truth and facts are bound and controlled by power, while truth and facts are often contestable, we are certainly not served well as a people to make wild claims that no facts can ever exist (Holmes, 2016).

Here, let's consider these comments from journalists, one Tweet replying to me from Juana Summers (@jmsummers, 18 June 2014), then writing at NPR: "@plthomasEdD I'm not sure it's my place to say whether the study is credible, but we both note the significant criticism of the methods." And then one news article directly about Trump:

Asked by host Chuck Todd whether he'd be willing to call out a falsehood as a "lie" like some other news outlets have done, [Wall Street Journal editor Gerard] Baker demurred, saying it was up to the newspaper to just present the set of facts and let the reader determine how to classify a statement.

"I'd be careful about using the word, 'lie.' 'Lie' implies much more than just saying something that's false. It implies a deliberate intent to mislead," Baker said, noting that when Trump claimed "thousands" of Muslims were celebrating on rooftops in New Jersey on 9/11, the Journal investigated and reported that they found no evidence of a claim. (Gold, 2017)

Keeping traditional and current standards of mainstream journalism (poses of objectivity and neutrality) in mind, now consider how the mainstream media are addressing fake news directly:

Established news organizations usually own their domains and they have a standard look that you are probably familiar with. Sites with such endings like .com.co should make you raise your eyebrows and tip you off that you need to dig around more to see if they can be trusted. This is true even when the site looks professional and has semi-recognizable logos. For example, abcnews.com is a legitimate news source, but abcnews.com.co is not, despite its similar appearance. (Davis, 2016)

To be blunt, helping *consumers of media* distinguish between the reality of fake news (abcnews.com.co) and “a legitimate news source” (abcnews.com) fails miserably because in essence these two present us with a very dangerous paradox: *fake news is real and real news is fake* (with the WSJ’s odd twist on the false history of George Washington: “We cannot call a lie ‘a lie!’”). Two ways this manifests itself are (1) mainstream media are rushing to cover fake news, but only to distinguish it from “legitimate” news, and (2) mainstream media refuse to take a stand on credible sources, warranted claims, and naming lies as “lies.”

A popular media phenomenon exists that speaks to the essential problem with mainstream journalism:

Jumping the Shark is the moment when an established long-running series changes in a significant manner in an attempt to stay fresh. Ironically, that moment makes the viewers realize that the show’s finally run out of ideas. It’s reached its peak, it’ll never be the same again, and from now on it’s all downhill. (Jumping the Shark, n.d.)

In mainstream journalism, I call our problem “crossing the Bigfoot line.” In other words, and as I have been documenting for years in edujournalism, mainstream journalism has adopted and embraced a pose that allows them *to report on a real event without taking any stance on the finer elements of the event being reported*.

Just a few decades ago, tabloid journalism was distinct from mainstream journalism because tabloids used the “just reporting what we are being told” defense. If a person came to a tabloid with images or video and a wild story about Bigfoot ransacking their camp site, the tabloid eagerly and with outlandish headlines reported the *fact* that this person told them the story—while taking the pose I shared above: “I’m not sure it’s my place to say whether the [story] is credible.” There was a time when mainstream media balked at just reporting as fact that source A made claim X *if the journalists found claim X to be lacking in credibility*.

And while online click-bait has supplanted the outlandish grocery store tabloid in our increasingly virtual avenues for news and information, what is more troubling is that mainstream journalism has callously crossed that Bigfoot line, now brazenly using click-bait headline techniques (hard to distinguish from fake news) and

remaining entrenched in their refusal to verify the claims of those about whom they are reporting.

Now there exists a great deal of fretting about the future of the free press under Trump; however, we have ample evidence that mainstream media and journalists had crossed the Bigfoot line long ago (Hedges, 2016), and not at the hands of rising fascism, but willingly as a natural development of capitalism and consumerism. The public in the U.S. and many voters hold provably false beliefs (Rampell, 2016) that guide how they live their lives and how they vote; this was pre-Trump, and this was in the context of how the media carelessly feed the masses.

Now that the Bigfoot line has been crossed by mainstream media, educators have a troubling challenge before us. Yes, the public and our students need much greater skills in critical media literacy, but those skills will mean little if we are left without a critical free press (see below) as an option. As it stands, on the other side of the Bigfoot line is the new mantra of mainstream journalism: "We are not fake news." This is a mighty low and ultimately irrelevant bar.

FAIR AND BALANCED EDUCATION AND JOURNALISM: ON THE DEATH OF DEMOCRACY

Through both my work as an educator (nearly two decades as a high school English teacher and another 15-plus years at the university level), I have rejected often calls for journalists and teachers to be objective, apolitical, focusing on Howard Zinn's brilliant metaphor of being unable to remain neutral on a moving train. Both calling for no politics in any context and taking a neutral stance are, in fact, political themselves—the former is a political strategy to deny some Others their politics while imposing your own and the latter is the politics of passively endorsing the status quo (in a society where racism and sexism, for example, continue to thrive, being neutral is an indirect endorsement of both).

Education and journalism—universal free public education and the free press—share many important and disturbing qualities: they are in theory essential to the creation and preservation of a free and equitable people, they remain mostly unachieved in the U.S. in practice because they are often the tools of powerful people and forces who distort their ideal contributions to democracy and equity, and at the heart of that failure (we have failed them; they have not failed us) is the shared traditional code of education/teachers and journalism/journalists assuming neutral poses, being forced into a state of objectively presenting both sides in a fair and balanced way.

Particularly in an era labeled "post-truth"—and I argue we are here *because* of our failures in education and journalism—demanding that educators and journalists remain neutral is not the right goal and not actually how either functions. In fact, education and journalism are always political, and in most contexts, educators and journalists routinely break the rule of neutrality—and thus, when anyone wags a finger and exclaims "We must be fair and balanced! Show both sides!" the truth is

not that educators or journalists are being ideological or biased, but that someone in power feels that his/her politics is being challenged. Let me illustrate in both education and journalism, starting with the media.

When we compare the Ray Rice inspired public debate about domestic abuse to the Adrian Peterson motivated public debate about corporal punishment, the *neutral press myth* is completely unmasked because domestic abuse (men hitting and psychologically abusing women) was entirely examined throughout the media as wrong (no pro-abuse side aired) while that same media almost exclusively presented corporal punishment as a debate with a fair and balanced presentation of both sides to adults hitting children. What is clear here is incredibly disturbing: The media, in fact, make decisions about when to honor credible positions, when to reject or even *not cover* invalidated and unethical positions, and when to shrink back into the “both sides” cover.

While decades of research and the same ethical concerns about power and abuse related to rejecting domestic abuse *entirely refute* corporal punishment, the media routinely chooses to remain neutral on a moving train aimed at the health and well-being of powerless children. In other words, when media shirks its role in creating and maintaining a free and equitable people behind its tin shield of objectivity, this is a dishonest pose because the media routinely take sides.

Finally, I want to highlight that education represents this same dishonest dynamic—claiming to be apolitical, or aspiring to be apolitical, while often taking sides. Unless I am misreading the current mood of the country, the increased interest in 1984 and other works of literature similar to George Orwell’s dystopian science fiction (such as the TV series adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*) is along a spectrum of concern about fearing the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. Concurrently, with the public discussions about fake news and post-truth, we are experiencing a renaissance in examining how power and language are inseparable.

So what does it mean when teachers call for presenting both sides of this debate when we bring politically charged novels by Orwell or Atwood into high school and college classes? Before answering, let me offer a few examples from typical lessons found in high schools for virtually every student. Both the Holocaust and slavery in the U.S. are taught as foundational content in anyone’s education; these are disturbing topics, and hard issues. When we teach the Holocaust, notably through *Night* by Elie Wiesel in an English course, do we rush to have students read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to fairly represent both sides, treating each position as morally equivalent, allowing our students to choose whichever position she/he wishes? When we teach U.S. slavery, possibly having students read Frederick Douglass, do we also find eugenicists’ and racists’ declarations demonizing blacks to fairly represent both sides, treating each position as morally equivalent, allowing our students to choose whichever position she/he wishes?

As in the media, educators at all levels routinely take sides—the answer to the two questions above reveal. And thus, I am lost on how or why educators would find ways to present pro-fascist ideas to balance literature study about the threats of

fascism and totalitarianism. Using Orwell and all sorts of powerful literature to help students on the cusp of or early in their roles as active participants in a democracy to better read the world through critical media literacy and better act on that world in informed and ethical ways is the very essence of politics, one not corrupted by simplistic partisan politics of endorsing Democrats or Republicans (which is worth resisting in education and journalism).

Currently, the U.S. and even the entire world are faced with whether or not we truly believe in freedom and equity, whether or not we are willing to invest in the institutions that can leverage both that freedom and equity—institutions such as formal education and the media. And we have been here before, in the same words and the same actions. If the answer is yes, then our resolve must be linked to demanding that our teachers and journalists are grounded in taking informed and ethical stands, not the dishonest and uncritical pose of objectivity. As I have shown above, neither is really being neutral now, but instead, pulling out the objective card only when it serves the interests of the status quo.

Critical educators and critical journalists must not serve the whims of power and money, and must be transparent in their pursuit of credible evidence and ethical behavior. To frame everything as a debate with equally credible antithetical sides is dishonest and insufficient for the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Teachers and journalists are *always political agents*; both professions must choose in whose interest they are willing to work. The neutral pose by either is to take a seat on the train, to keep eyes down, and to allow the train to rumble along as if the tracks are not leading to a cliff. Pretending that cliff isn't now on our horizon will not stop the train from crashing on the rocks of the coming abyss.

ADICHIE'S "DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY" AND THE RISE OF POST-TRUTH TRUMPLANDIA

Focusing on fake news and post-truth discourse, then, often fails to confront that they are but extreme although logical extensions of a mainstream media and political elite existing almost entirely on false narratives—the denial of basic reality. The bootstrap and rising boat narratives, black-on-black crime, the pervasive threat of terrorism, the lazy poor, the welfare queen, and the relentless “kids today” mantra—these are all powerful as well as enduring claims but also provably false (Nightingale, 2016), if we practice critical media literacy.

As noted above, the media simply report that Source X makes Claim A—but never venture into the harder story that Source X is *making a false* Claim A—especially when false Claim A rings true within the Great American Myths (such as the stereotypes about people in poverty callously included in the soda story in the NYT) that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) powerfully warns about:

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call “the danger of the single story.” ...

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Adichie artfully shares more examples in her talk, but her message from 2009 rings much more horrifying today in the post-truth U.S., where the elected leader of the free world can say something one minute, deny it the next, and remain safely cloaked in the lies that endure as the "one story" many in the U.S. believe despite ample evidence to the contrary.

Part of teaching critical media literacy is to warn students about the failure of having only one story. The one story of black men as criminals that allows police to disproportionately execute those black men in the streets. The one story of the lazy poor that allows political leaders to avoid their moral obligations to provide social services, including health care even for children. The one story of objectified women that allows rape culture and the democratically elected leader of the free world to boast about his own cavalier behavior as a sexual predator.

And so: "Stories matter. Many stories matter," Adichie (2009) concludes: "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." More recently for Adichie (2016), "now is the time" to confront post-truth discourse, and the media are on notice:

Yet a day after the election, people spoke of the vitriol between Barack Obama and Donald Trump. No, the vitriol was Trump's. Now is the time to burn false equivalencies forever. Pretending that both sides of an issue are equal when they are not is not "balanced" journalism; it is a fairy tale—and, unlike most fairy tales, a disingenuous one.

A post-truth U.S. is creeping toward yet another of the very ugliest stories of a people claiming to embrace life and liberty but denying basic reality instead. The question before educators tasked with teaching critical media literacy is whether or not we have the capacity for changing that arc of history toward, as Adichie expresses, the possibility to "regain a kind of paradise."

U.S. AND EDUCATION REFORM NEED A CRITICAL FREE PRESS

As a powerful example of how fake news and post-truth discourse are less dangerous to our democracy than mainstream media is journalism's flawed coverage of education. Journalists, in their quest to maintain the traditional commitment to "fair and balanced" journalism, consistently *endorse* and perpetuate organizations without credibility and baseless claims (such as cries of "bad" teacher, "bad" teacher education, and "bad" unions).

With yet another report released by National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a right-leaning think tank, that failure of the mainstream media can be highlighted once again—specifically in coverage at *NPR* and *Education Week*, both of which are viewed as left-leaning mainstream media: "Study Delivers Failing Grades For Many Programs Training Teachers," Claudio Sanchez and Juana Summers (2014); "Alternative Certification Deemed Weak by NCTQ in New Teacher-Prep Report," Stephen Sawchuk (2014); "Most Teacher Preparation Falls Short on Strategies for ELLs, NCTQ Finds," Lesli A. Maxwell (2014).

First, the mainstream coverage of NCTQ's reports remains trapped inside *assumed crises* (the single-story mistake) that have no basis in fact; NCTQ's reports and then the media begin with the givens that education suffers under the burden of "bad" teachers, "bad" teacher certification, and "bad" unions. However, at the very least, these claims are disproportional, if not outright erroneous:

- If we maintain the current context that student achievement is accurately reflected in test scores (and it isn't), then we must acknowledge that teacher quality (10–15%) and school quality account for only about 20% of that measurement, but "60 percent of achievement outcomes is explained by student and family background characteristics (most are unobserved, but likely pertain to income/poverty)," as Di Carlo (2010) details.
- If we accept that value-added methods (VAM) can accurately and consistently identify "good" and "bad" teachers (and the evidence is that it cannot [Amrein-Beardsley, 2017]) and if we accept the much repeated claim by Chetty et al. that teacher quality can add \$50,000 to the lifetime earning potential of a student (and that also is a significantly contested claim [Thomas, 2014, June 16], as well as another example of advocacy and media hyperbole since that lifetime-earning figure equates to about 1.5–2 tanks of gas per month), the enormity of the claims about "bad" teachers and the urgency expressed about creating and implementing huge and expensive test-based systems to address teacher quality are at best *overstated*. No rational person would endorse the cost-benefit analysis of such schemes.
- Finally, claims that teachers unions are primary or significant *negative* influences on educational quality are powerfully refuted by the historical and current fact that the states in the U.S. with the lowest standardized test scores tend to be those that are right-to-work (non-union) states. Unionization correlates *positively* with measurable student achievement, in fact, while

poverty is the greatest correlation with low measurable student outcomes (for the record, union bashing is a straw man because U.S. public education has a poverty problem, not a union problem).

Next, NCTQ has established a sort of immediate *appearance* of credibility through three strategies: partnering itself with *U.S. News & World Report*, garnering significant and influential sources of funding, and bombarding the mainstream media with a series of reports without vetting those reports through blind peer review as is common in traditional scholarship, which slows down and greatly harnesses higher-quality research from reaching the public (Molnar, 2001; Yettick, 2009). And scholars don't issue press releases, and apparently, journalists respond primarily to press releases instead of conducting investigative journalism.

Further, once I engaged Sawchuck (*EdWeek*) and then Summers (NPR) on Twitter, several key aspects of this phenomenon were highlighted. Both journalists argued that their pieces on NCTQ were fair, and even critical—which I will examine below—but here I return to the comment quoted above by Summers on Twitter: “I’m not sure it’s my place to say whether the study is credible, but we both note the significant criticism of the methods.”

My two reactions to Summers deferring from examining the credibility of NCTQ are, first, to strongly disagree, and second, note that no journalists need to do any real investigative journalism to uncover that NCTQ has no credibility because all of that work has been done already by a number of scholars (see Thomas, 2014, June 17; Thomas & Goering, 2016). As disturbing, however, as that stance is, examining carefully the coverage of NCTQ reveals that the mainstream media do in fact *endorse* NCTQ implicitly (despite claims of impartiality) and also marginalizes the credible critiques of NCTQ.

All three articles (see above) have headlines that establish immediately for any reader that NCTQ's report is worthy of major media coverage. Next, all three articles have ledes that also present NCTQ positively:

The nation's teacher-preparation programs have plenty of room for improvement, according to a new report. (Sanchez & Summers, 2014)

Alternative-certification programs for preparing teachers suffer from many of the same problems that the National Council on Teacher Quality has identified in traditional, university-based programs, the Washington-based group concludes in a new pilot study. (Sawchuk, 2014)

More than 75 percent of elementary teacher-preparation programs are failing when it comes to readying future teachers to work effectively with English-language learners, a new report from the National Council on Teacher Quality contends. (Maxwell, 2014)

Sanchez and Summers (again, recall that Summers argues it isn't her job to assign credibility to the study) certainly imply that the study is credible by using this

language: "The study is a dismal read, given that the U.S. spends more than \$6 billion each year to prepare teachers for the classroom."

The NCTQ study is only a "dismal read" if it is *accurate* (and it isn't). NCTQ has been carefully discredited in scholarship (for example, see Fuller, 2013) for serious conflicts of interest (Teach For America and KIPP leaders sit on the Advisory Board), for a flawed study design, and for shoddy methodology. So how are credible academic critiques of NCTQ characterized in the journalism that claims not to take evaluative positions?:

When NCTQ released a version of this report last year, it was met with some skepticism among educators and those responsible for preparing teachers. Critics said the advocacy group should have visited individual teacher-prep programs and talked to graduates and students, rather than relying on syllabi. (Sanchez & Summers, 2014)

Last year's inaugural teacher-prep review was immediately rejected by most teacher colleges and, especially, by their main membership body, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Criticism focused on the NCTQ's tack of reviewing syllabi and other course materials rather than visiting institutions; its use of open-records requests and current students to obtain documents; the complaint that its standards weren't agreed to by the profession; and the fact that its research products aren't peer reviewed. Additionally, critics have claimed that the project is ideologically driven, given NCTQ's role as incubator of an alternative-certification group, the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), which received federal funding from the George W. Bush administration.

The latter complaint seems less viable now that the NCTQ has turned its green eyeshade toward alternative-certification programs. (Sawchuk, 2014)

"Some skepticism" and "critics" clearly position credible scholarship negatively while maintaining the implied endorsement of NCTQ as an organization and NCTQ's reports. And while Sawchuk appears to address more directly NCTQ's lack of credibility, he still marginalizes scholars as "critics" and then in the last paragraph above, simply discounts the criticism.

Further in Sawchuk's (2014) piece, the contrast between lacking credibility (NCTQ) and credibility (scholarship discrediting NCTQ) is reduced to a simple misunderstanding and a matter of tone (not substance):

Notably, the report's introduction this year contains a number of mea culpas regarding the bad blood between the NCTQ and teacher colleges. And Walsh agreed that her group bore some of the blame.

"At times we were a bit arrogant about what it is we think teacher education should be doing," she said. "Even if we agree to disagree, we can be more respectful."

Again, this trivializes criticism of NCTQ and further equates NCTQ (an advocacy think tank) with scholarship—while also painting NCTQ as apologetic (despite the organization maintaining its *threat* of ranking programs whether they cooperate or not; a powerful tool afforded NCTQ because of its media partnership with *U.S. News & World Report*).

One of my strongest criticisms of teachers is that we far too often allow ourselves to be trapped within traditional calls that we take neutral stances; however, the U.S. needs *critical* teachers (political teachers) if our public schools are to be a foundation for our democracy. What I have detailed above is that journalists in the U.S. have bowed to the same call for neutrality, one that cannot be accomplished but can serve as a shield for maintaining the status quo. The U.S. needs *critical* journalists, ones who see their job as maintaining a commitment to seeking out and identifying the credibility of issues and events they report. Only those in power benefit when the free press is mostly free of taking to task those in power. Nowhere is that more apparent than in how the mainstream media fails the education reform debate.

WHY EDUCATION: CRITICAL LITERACY, FREEDOM, AND EQUITY

Along with the failures of mainstream journalism, the 2016 presidential election cycle provided another powerful and disturbing lesson in the U.S.: formal education has failed to accomplish the single most important aspect of why universal public education is essential for a free and just people, which includes grounding instruction in critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical media literacy. Often, we view formal education as a key to economic success, emphasizing the strong correlation between higher educational attainment and greater income. But we also remain committed to our mythologies and cultural narratives about education being the “great equalizer.”

However, as this discussion will examine further, these beliefs are not supported by evidence. Yes, greater educational attainment correlates well with income, but schooling does not create equity (Thomas, 2014, December 4). While the relationship between formal education and any person’s career and earning potential remains incredibly important in a capitalistic society, the *single most important aspect of why universal public education is essential for a free and just people* remains the relationship between formal education and freedom as well as social equity. Integral to the role of formal education as it contributes to individual freedom and societal equity is *critical literacy*: “challeng[ing] the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” (Shor, 1999). For Paulo Freire (1993), a founding thinker in critical pedagogy, critical literacy is the ability to read and re-read the world along with the ability to write and re-write the world.

In more accessible language, critical literacy is the ability of any person to act on her/his world instead of being a slave to that world. Critical literacy is *living* instead of simply *surviving*. Here I want to offer one caveat: As I note often, formal schooling is not the only path to being educated. Many people (writers notably) have

achieved a high level of awareness and education in spite of formal schooling. Yet, universal public education—as created by our very flawed founding fathers—was rightfully placed as essential if people were to achieve freedom and if a country were to ever become equitable (in our inception, we were far from that; today, equity remains a goal of the U.S., not something we have achieved).

But being well educated is not simply about the acquisition of knowledge (what Freire rejected as the “banking” concept of education). Being well educated is about being able to acquire knowledge in order to investigate and interrogate that knowledge: What is the source of that knowledge? Whose interest does that knowledge serve? Despite being economically and militarily powerful, the U.S. remains stagnated, when compared to other democracies, in a belief culture—stubbornly clinging to unwarranted beliefs despite an abundance of evidence easily accessible to anyone.

My public writing is dominated by interacting with well-educated people (often edujournalists) who are committed to provably false claims, and daily I interact with family, friends, and students who also cling to falsehoods and function while holding contradictory beliefs. These experiences are vivid to me because they reflect my own journey, having been raised in the South and indoctrinated with beliefs that I now reject strongly—racism, classism, sexism, homophobia. Much of my life over the past thirty years has been stepping back from beliefs that I discovered are false, flawed, unethical. That process is hurtful, disappointing, even embarrassing.

Even though I am approaching 60 and well educated, it still happens.

When teaching writing, I am so aware of the power of misconceptions and false beliefs, that I teach students to focus on misconceptions when doing public writing—a dependable pattern of “you likely think X is true, but consider this.” And throughout all my teaching, grounded in critical pedagogy, I foster critical literacy and critical media literacy as a foundational commitment to individual freedom and equity.

Let me end with a couple examples.

Critical literacy is an awareness *and* investigation of codes. For example, why are blacks often called “thugs,” but whites demonstrating similar behaviors are not? Because “thug” is a code for “nigger” that remains socially acceptable only because of a *lack of critical literacy*. And research shows that when whites are confronted with the fact of racism, they immediately emphasize their own hardships (Phillips, 2015). This also is a lack of critical literacy that allows an understanding of percentages: more whites are shot by police because whites outnumber blacks about 5 to 1, but blacks are more likely to be shot by police in terms of percentages—a fact of *racial inequity*.

Finally, as well, that whites suffer hardships isn't the issue—because whites do. Racism is about power, and the fact that white hardship is not because of being white while black hardship often is *because of being black*. Belief is dangerous because it oversimplifies the world to the point of being harmful. Critical literacy is about

being able to step back from those simple beliefs in order to negotiate and even change the real and complex world.

This is the more important *why* of education, more important than what job or salary anyone will have or achieve. Education is about taking control of life so that it doesn't happen to you, so that it doesn't steamroll over you. Without critical literacy and increasingly critical media literacy, a people become pawns to demagogues and buffoons. We are a people without critical literacy and that may result in our being the pawns we deserve to be.

NOTES

- ¹ I know this appears to read like a piece from *The Onion*, but Republican Rep. Butt is real; *The Onion* would have used Ophelia Butt.
- ² Consider that the century-old debate between Creationism and evolution has morphed into the rise of Intelligent Design (replacing creationism) as pseudo-science to battle with traditional science, evolution.

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