

Derek Gottlieb Greetings and welcome to episode 38 of Thinking in the Midst, a podcast about philosophy and action in education. With Cara Furman, I'm Derek Gottlieb. Today, in our final episode before the 2024 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, which starts next week, we're hearing from a few of the presenters themselves. Not giving their papers, obviously, but talking about how the ideas in those papers have emerged and taken shape. Our guests are focusing on the dynamics in the effects of and the range of responses to conspiratorial thinking in general. Enjoy the conversation or don't. You're not sheeple after all.

Cara Furman Welcome. It is fantastic to share the Zoom room with the three of you. And we are here today to talk about conspiracy theories and conspiracy mindedness. And we are especially excited about this episode because Each one of you is bringing a paper or working together on a paper for the Philosophy of Education Society annual meeting. And your work was again selected by Amy Shuffleton as particularly interesting and focused on the topic of the annual meeting. And so we are going to talk to you both about the papers that you're bringing but also your work generally around the topic. And I'm going to turn to you, Michaila, just to briefly introduce yourself.

Michaila Peters I'm Michaila Peters, and I'm a doctoral student in philosophy at Boston College. Thanks for having us.

Cara Furman Wonderful. Thank you, Michaila. And Ksenia?

Ksenia Filatov Hi, everyone. My name is Ksenia Filatov, and I'm a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction at Boston College, and I'm thrilled to be here.

Cara Furman Wonderful. And Yuya?

Yuya Takeda Hello, thank you for having me. My name is Yuya Takeda. I'm currently a sessional instructor at the University of British Columbia and also at the University Canada West. I recently completed my dissertation on critical media literacy and conspiracy theories. Looking forward to sharing.

Cara Furman Perfect. You are seeped in this topic then. And I'll turn it to you, Derek.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks, Cara. Thanks, everybody. Nice to see and meet you. As has already been said now, this session came together or this session, this episode came together as part of an effort to sort of preview some of what people will see at the Philosophy of Education Society meeting. And so. We're very excited to be able to facilitate a conversation between a couple of papers that wouldn't necessarily speak to each other in other formats. I'm going to ask a broad question about sort of how you came to be interested in conspiratorial mindedness, if we can call it that, broadly conceived. And so if you could just give a little bit of a personal history on on how this topic drew your interest and sort of where you are going with it, that would be great. Can I can I start with you, Yuya?

Yuya Takeda Yes, absolutely. Well, the paper I'm presenting at this year's PES is a little extension of my dissertation project, which I recently completed, as I mentioned. Both my dissertation and the PES paper share the same point of departure. I was struck by the apparent similarities between the dispositions critical media literacy education aims to cultivate and the characteristics conspiracy theorists claim to embody. So critical media literacy teaches us to maintain skeptical attitude toward information and interrogate ideas of common sense, because it might be a camouflage for the dominant ideology, excluding other views and so on. And it also emphasizes the importance of taking actions to make changes. And conspiracy theorists often claim to do exactly these things. So as a critical media literacy advocate, I find this to be a big issue. So my research investigates if it was possible to demarcate educationally desirable from undesirable, desirable forms of critical reading and writing.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks. Thanks very much for that. Ksenia, let me let me turn a similar question over to you.

Ksenia Filatov Yeah, so, you know, before this PhD, I was a teacher of English language arts, and certainly critical literacy featured a lot in my teaching. But this was very much kind of in the background to this paper. But what actually happened was, I'm a member of this Facebook group, like a Australasian philosophy for teachers, philosophy in schools association. It's related to my former days of being trained as a P4C philosophy for children facilitator. And sometime last fall, a post came up sharing a project from Birmingham University in this group. And I just on a whim watched, read the article, and I watched some of the videos. And I was kind of horrified by what I saw. And I left a comment to this post to say, actually, I think this is not a very good project. And I'm extremely worried about it. And Mikayla happened to see my comment. Her curiosity was sparked. So she went and watched these things. And then we were already friends and we had an interaction about that. And I said to her, okay, how serious do you think this is? And is it serious enough for you and I to submit a paper about it? And we thought it was. So this is like a very spontaneous, naturally emergent thing in response to something we saw happening in the world. And maybe later I can talk more about why I was particularly sensitive to what I saw, but that's it for me now.

Derek Gottlieb Excellent, thank you. Michaila, can you speak to your side of that interaction in particular? Like what made you want to reach out?

Michaila Peters Yeah, so the videos, as we will talk about in our discussion at PES seem to target a very specific political community, that being the Trump voter. Trump base. And I grew up in a town that was very, very vulnerable to that movement. And so I've had a lot of concern about the rise of conspiracy theories and their role in creating a lot of political dysfunction. But my perspective on what drives them, I think, is a lot more complicated than what I'm seeing in mainstream epistemological literature. There are gestures at their complex emotional drivers behind conspiracy theorizing, but I think trying to simplify them into a couple of generic emotional motivators like I want to be a unique person or I want there to be a more specific answer to this thing that is wreaking a lot of havoc on my life. I think it's a lot more historically complicated than that, that these vulnerabilities to this kind of epistemic theorizing

have come from a long period of perhaps being epistemically excluded, by virtue of having been politically excluded because of small spread out populations. And so it's, it's difficult for me, because on the one hand, I see it as very serious issue, I do think that philosophers have a role to play in allowing their insights to shape solutions in the world, but I think we have to carry that expertise with such serious responsibility and when people sort of create their work with an implication that these are the clear answers to the questions that And then they create solutions that could be potentially more divisive. I have a lot of fear and anxiety about that because I know what's at stake in those divisions. So I feel a lot of anger and frustration at what's happening with the rise of conspiracy theories. I don't think all conspiracy theories are the same. But that said, if we're going to do a solution, we need to do so with more perspectives brought in. And so I see my role as kind of trying to enrich this conversation about what is going on in these huge portions of America and also potentially other related community situations around the globe.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks. Thanks very much for that. Cara.

Cara Furman Yeah, so you've. Got us intrigued. So tell us a little bit about absolutely without totally giving away the paper, tell us. So here's a way to enter into it that recently I used in class and a group of grad students found helpful. Let's pretend you are in conversation with a really intelligent family member or teacher who you meet, you know, or worked with and you want to give them a short summary of what you found in this paper. You want to kind of get them interested. Could you tell us a little bit for that? Tell that person a little bit about what you have found about this topic in your paper. What were these videos and what are you arguing?

Derek Gottlieb Michaila, do you want to do you want to start with this question? Then we'll get Ksenia to add on and then over to you.

Michaila Peters Sure. So our paper is interesting because it's responding to a specific project. So there are kind of general complaints about the way the conversation around conspiracy theories has taken shape in the epistemic literature, but also in this particular project. And so what are the issues we find is that there are is just an oversimplification or over-idealization of what challenges knowers face in the real world, be it the time and energy we have to spend on collecting evidence or around specific issues, or how to discern which kind of media authority may be more trustworthy than another, But also that those idealizations happen in very specific like portions of a contribution so we found that you know there was only one exception in the videos where we move out of this cartoon fictionalized space of the animals back into the real world and that was when there was a clear targeted placing a blame upon this Trump base for engaging in conspiracy theorizing. And then we get several different kinds of cognitive biases that they may be falling into the trap of. And that's sort of the only explanation. And we wanted to see more of a clear upshot or a clear tool that children or the public or whoever the intended audience can actually use to discern when to sort of like, have a healthy amount of skepticism towards different authorities or adjudicate between them. We didn't really see that happening. But this is a problem throughout all of the recent epistemological literature on conspiracy theories, recent op-eds by philosophers on conspiracy

theories. They're all making these very psychological accounts of know, what cognitive biases are and how they're able to scale up conspiracy theorizing. And so we think there just needs to be a lot more historical, even phenomenological discussion of like, okay, how does trauma play a role is like one kind of emotional motivator. It's not like we're talking about generic emotions here, we're talking about emotions in response to very specific and complicated events and in a space where we also have memories of other patterns of governments and media leaders maybe not being trustworthy and we're trying to draw connections between what we know from our historical lessons and what we're seeing in front of us and those are scary wagers to make. So we just we want to kind of put a lot of those details back into the story and say like, look, we all want a solution to this and we know that we need one urgently. And so that's going to tempt philosophers, especially if they think they can wield expertise in a public that needs, you know, an answer to make them feel better about what's going on. We can jump to quick and too easy answers. But I think when You know, we're dealing with a problem that is real in the world. We need to not. Overly science it, I guess that there's going to be some messiness to this process of sorting out what's going on and that's going to require working with communities to find out what the experience feels like on their end. So that's I think our major discovery, not so much a discovery, but more of a, you know, maybe this is a reasonable worry to have about the evolution of the philosophical conversation and that. this contribution, which seems to me really common sense of bringing in more perspectives, maybe actually needs to be made explicit.

Cara Furman Thank you. Really interesting work. Ksenia, you want to add in some layers of nuance that you feel like the work is adding in?

Ksenia Filatov Yeah, I think for me, what made this particularly problem what made this project particularly problematic for me was seeing it in a wider global context in which we have essentially investigative journalism on trial. We have Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks has been in prison for more than a decade. This, this is the background, right, of my critical media literacy education, as an adult. And so, for me, just the stakes are higher. The stakes are a little bit higher than like, let's, let's make sure we have a coordinated response to this pandemic. And all these conspiracy theorists are getting in the way. Well, it's like, Actually, there have been real conspiracies. They have been revealed to us thanks to Wikileaks. And the person who is responsible for doing that work in the public interest for us is in jail. And so taking it from this perspective and kind of looking at these cartoons, I was like, I have absolutely every reason to assume to theorize that conspiracies may be behind events unfolding in the world today. And it's only a matter of time before those leaks will come out. And we'll know. So for me, like, that's, that's the big, that's the background of it. That made me kind of, essentially, or initially, sorry, I feel like there was just cringe here, for lack of a better word, yeah.

Michaila Peters I could just quickly follow on to that with another clarifying point, what Ksenia is bringing up about what's at stake for investigative journalism. We also have a worry about what's at stake in committing, I guess, to a democratic project where it seems like in the face of having trouble coordinating efforts around a global pandemic or around the fair and smooth passage of an election. Obvious concerns, right? There seems to be this growing opinion that, well, you know, we're kind of bad at being reasoners in the real world and at

making judgments about who to trust and Especially when tensions are running high right the videos address people in situations of marginalization may be extra vulnerable to wanting to join these alternative theorizing communities. And I think to a large extent, both of us would agree that there are many challenges to getting people to have better media literacy skills, that there are serious worries about being able to navigate these global events. And at the same time, if we choose to circumvent people's rationality and just sort of nudge them in the right direction, which has been one suggestion by recent literature, playing on their psychological tendencies as the videos we argue do, right? They're like creating this soft music and these nice animal characters to explain to you easily why conspiracy theories arise and these easy solutions to making sure that we can all, you know, work together to get through these global challenges. That when we do that and we say, it's okay to just trust, you know, heavy implication, mainstream information, whatever it is that that means, that we're in a serious sense giving up on forming democratic citizens. We are telling them, look, we can't trust you to make the right decisions for yourselves to read information well. So, you know, when it comes to a high enough stakes issue, we may just kind of have to do it for you as experts. And I think there's kind of a waffling on whether or not people want to take responsibility for that being a claim. But I think we as quote unquote experts or emerging experts need to think really carefully about further damage that we're doing and creating this alienation between the supposed masses and whoever it is that we are in academia, that's not helping. It's only exacerbating the conditions by which people are going to feel more inclined to engage in especially problematic conspiracy theories.

Cara Furman Thank you. I think those are such really important points and it made me think really just briefly about I was reading a book about how the relationship between parents and the medical community with autism and that was a perfect example of I think what you're talking about here where there has always been an extremely troubled relationship between people who have children who are struggling, and in this case dealing with autism, and the public realm, and a lot of mistreatment of the parents. And so when finally there was this link between autism and vaccines, There was reasons for distrust already, not a link, but the people perceived a link. There was room for families to jump on what they saw as another example of the medical community failing them. Yuya, would you be able to talk through how you're entering into this topic?

Yuya Takeda Yes, yes, thank you. I highly resonate with what Mikayla and Ksenia said about this kind of like a nuanced treatment of conspiracy theory as a textual genre. We often use the label very petulatively in order to dismiss certain explanations or ideas. But one of the findings that I went through the literature of conspiracy theories research is that researchers are increasingly moving away from this kind of like a general dismissal of the conspiracy theories. and arguing that well conspiracy is rather takes take place rather frequently in politics and so on so we need to be cautious otherwise we create a condition where conspirators get away with their conspiracies easily and As Mikaela and Ksenia were saying, there are certain elements that makes people concerned or worry about that actually conspiracy is happening in the background. So two things. One is that I think it's important to highlight the centrality of meanings and values in conspiracy theories as a textual genre that, like, as Michaila was

suggesting, we tend to kind of like recourse to the scientific facts and objectivity to debunk conspiracy theories. But maybe there is some concerns that are expressed in those theories. So one of the examples that I talked about in my dissertation was that during the When the vaccines became available in Canada, indigenous communities in Canada expressed their hesitancy to take vaccinations, many of them, and it was reported in the media. And in the expression of the hesitancy, some of them sort of resembled the structure of the conspiracy theories saying that, you know, these communities, these people are used as experimental rats of this experimental vaccines and so on. Those are the words used by one of the chiefs of First Nations community. And This was because there has been a historical and ongoing violence against these communities. And some of the community members remember that they are being used as guinea pigs of vaccines. Or indigenous women went through forced sterilization through medical facilities. So when those things are brought on the table, Proposing, demonstrating scientific facts about the safety of the vaccines is not enough. There's much more deeper level recognition of the violence and reparation and changing the system to make things more transparent and so on is important. So one thing is that Treating conspiracy theories at the level of matters of fact is not enough, but it also needs to be discussed as a matter of concern.

Michaila Peters I absolutely agree. A big part of my broader work is in thinking about how we can adopt a more critical kind of hermeneutic to these positions that we encounter, because I think that Sometimes theorists are just taking the words too literally, you know, you hear positions about distrusting experts or distrusting a certain swath of information coming from the quote unquote mainstream. And what they probably don't realize or maybe fail to pause and remember is that You know, these are kind of like taglines to long-standing resentments. They're not always specific, full-throated, rational positions. It's the same as someone saying, like, two people in a rural community ask you this all the time, calling each other communists, right? Or, like, accusing each other of being liberal. It's not really about communism. How many of these people have ever read Marx or really thought about what communism is or entails? It's just a... an association of a word and they fall in these clusters and I think in order to read between the lines and figure out what's really an issue, what's the real worry driving this public testimony, you need to have lived within a community to be able to speak their language. You have to be able to decode these things. The same goes for stating or endorsing a position, maybe a way of gaining saliency by merely giving you visibility, right? So like, maybe you have a real worry about poverty, but all the other ways you've tried to make it salient haven't worked for you, so joining this other community that's part of a populous movement gives you a platform, or taking on this position that has a community associated with it gives you a platform. I don't think that explains all conspiracy theories, but I think a good share of them that are targeted by these videos and other theorists in particular maybe fall into that basket. And we have a lot of work to do in terms of figuring out, okay, so if this is the behavior that we're worried about, what are the root causes that are involved and what are better solutions to sort of mitigate those root causes? Because it doesn't seem to be engaging at the level of the literal discourse if that's not really what's driving it in the first place.

Cara Furman Yuya, adding onto that, am I hearing correctly too that a big part of the work that you're doing is that these while the current version of a concern, say about the COVID-19 vaccine, is not accurately being created to harm a particular community, but that you're talking about communities where, again, medical science has intentionally done harm or experimented upon, and that it's a bit of gaslighting that there's this, people are often accused of thinking conspiratorially when actually they're speaking a minority perspective about a very real oppression. Does that sound right?

Yuya Takeda Yeah, yeah, I think yes. So my point is that Yeah, it's that when people articulate their concerns and worries that make them suspicious about the intentions or malicious intention of the people in power and so on, then yes, I think it's

Cara Furman Sorry, I kind of lost my... Malicious things have been done. They just may not be intended in that exact iteration or moment. Yeah. Thank you.

Derek Gottlieb That's I just want to like this is all extremely fascinating for a variety of reasons, not least because the approach to critical media literacy that I am hearing emerge in this conversation is so different from that, which even in its aims and outlooks, from that which a couple of doctoral students that I've supervised have done. I'm going to ask about that in a second, but initially I just want to sort of pinpoint and check in with all of you that when we're talking about, I think Yuya put it ideally when he said, when he articulated the distinction between a fact and a concern, we've been using the word epistemological a lot. I take it that what we're talking about is a process by which facts are generated, a study into like what is merely a fact as opposed to a concern. So when we're talking about extra epistemological issues or the limits of epistemology, we're talking about things that are not strictly speaking matters of knowledge in a world in which there's a strong fact value distinction. Does that sound like a fair characterization of the general lay of the land?

Yuya Takeda Yes, yes, certainly. But with an acknowledgement that I am not devaluing the importance and significance of the epistemic elements here. So in the paper I'm discussing at PES, I talk about the the importance of balancing skepticism and trust. And the skepticism part, as we've been talking, there are some elements that resonate with what critical media literacy educators try to cultivate and what conspiracy theorists claim to embody. And, you know, the skepticism toward mainstream media or these health authorities to the the science in general, there are some elements that kind of like make those skepticism justifiable or I even venture to say desirable for democracy. But Those kinds of skepticism, I argued, must be accompanied by this kind of like the drive toward trust. And trust is not, again, it's not an epistemological concept, but there are, I talk about the epistemic roles that trust plays. in our knowledge, production and operationalization. Some of the things that social epistemologists talk about is that we rely on other people's testimony when we produce knowledge. When even scientists do not verify all the knowledge claims firsthand, but they rely on claims made by other scientists. And so what we see here is that the function of the epistemic institutions is to secure this kind of like a system of the fundamentally social nature of knowledge by authorizing and warranting some knowledge claims. And here, trust plays an important role in making things

function. So on the one hand, yes, there are elements of values and the politics involved in production of knowledge and distribution of it, but Trust is a moral concept that makes it possible for, perhaps makes it possible to avoid wrong kind of politicization of knowledge. So yes, matters of fact and matters of concern, I said as an important distinction, but it's not entirely separated from an epidemic concerns.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks, that helps make things significantly more clear. The standard question we ask at this point is something like, how does, you know, your lens and training as a philosopher enter into this conversation, but I think that's pretty right on the surface in this conversation in general. And B, I'd like to ask it in a little bit more of a specific way. So in supervising dissertations that have had to do with critical media literacy, Either the approach of the students that I have happened to supervise slash a large chunk of that literature seems to be driven by a concern to give individuals the skills to defend themselves against something like wrong thinking. But the conversation that we're having here is very differently about how to think about sort of an informational public space in ways that are inclusive, that avoid shutting down or dismissing or silencing voices on the basis of the accusation of a conspiracy. The perspective is very different. So could you talk a little bit about the differences involved like between those two general approaches to critical media literacy. And as you do so, maybe mention or discuss a couple of the the the thinkers that you are working with, whose resources you are drawing on in making your arguments. Ksenia, would it be OK to turn this question to you first?

Ksenia Filatov Yeah. I think one thinker, and Yuya would be familiar with that too, is Matty Denton, who argues for a non-pejorative approach to any conspiracy theory. We must examine it on its merits. And of course, in the conversation that we're having here says, we must also examine all of the wider socio-cultural historical weight that might be underpinning a given issue that so it's not just about the specific epistemic claim and evidence, but recognizing that evidence is not always available. And, you know, one of the points that I try to make in this in this paper that Michaila and I wrote together was that I mean, putting aside even the idea of like matters of concern and matters of value as sort of like a good heuristic to work within, where they really come together is in the use of inductive reasoning. So even present in Yuya's particular example with the indigenous communities, right, there's a pattern that's being observed, a pattern of our interaction with a given authority, a pattern that stretches back to before we were born. And from that pattern, we can reasonably infer that this given phenomenon that's in front of us seems like it has the same shape. And I think what you said, Cara, that your use of the word gaslighting is so apt here, because this was exactly my feeling when I was watching these cartoons. You know, I was watching them and I thought, in the last 10 years, we have become aware of so many political conspiracies that are really ugly and have absolutely nothing to do with our democratic processes whatsoever. These are political operators that are not elected officials making decisions, but we continue to use this cover of democracy And what I fear happening is that this need to, this identity that I'm seeing emerge in a lot of these responses to conspiracy theories coming from, be it philosophers or whoever, are sort of wedded to this identity of like, well, I'm in a democratic context. And so therefore, you know, I can trust the sources of information. I guess there's no relationship between the two, I

think, really anymore, as has been shown to us by WikiLeaks. So I think gaslighting is absolutely right. we must be willing to suspend these identities, right? Like, I come from a democratic context, suspend that and really think about, you know, what is going on in this particular context or situation, you know, before you launch on a kind of like, mission. Mission to educate those, you know, who, yeah, I hope that makes sense.

Derek Gottlieb Yeah. Yes, thank you. Michaila, can I go to you to see if you have anything to add to that?

Michaila Peters Yeah, I totally agree, obviously, with Ksenia. I think It's almost ironic that the same people who say we're embarking on these projects to save democracy, and at the same time, the way that we're going to do that is to circumvent individuals' own rational processing of information around them because we can't trust them to do so wisely. It's a complete hypocrisy. I can understand it. I can be sympathetic to how easy that trap is to fall into, but I think we really need to think critically about, you know, what do we mean by democracy? And it was always meant to be or expected to be a hard project. That doesn't mean that, you know, like, it's worth giving up on what's the alternative exactly that whoever has the expert hat on Tuesday, you know, makes the decisions on who it is that we're supposed to trust. That doesn't seem right to me. So to the question of thinkers, I've been really inspired by this recent uptick of supposed non-ideal epistemology. Some people, I think, some of the people we critique in our paper claim to be part of that project and yet still maintain some over abstractions that smooth away many of the contextual variables that are ultra relevant here. But I think the ones that I found most helpful are people like Ti Nguyen who acknowledge this expert linkage problem that Yuya is talking about where we are relying on other experts and they're relying on other experts and we're all in these complex systems of information. It doesn't come down to the judgment of one know, or sort of the positions that we're left with at the end of the day. My own advisor, Richard Atkins has been publishing in this area, Jack, and the 3 of them have kind of circled around this idea that we need to reject what they call a total irrationality thesis. So that means when we see claims that seem totally crazy to us, or amounts of distrust and skepticism that seem totally unwarranted to us, that this should open up a question rather than an immediate dismissal or attribution of epistemic culpability, because Those two actions are only going to drive the very resentment that has already fractured our communities of knowers from communicating with one another. That being experts in the masses, different groups within the masses, political parties, whatever it might be. I see polarization as this ongoing feedback loop where resentment and fear are driving this alienation. Maybe the people living in rural poverty really are vulnerable and have faced serious traumas and that resentment gets fueled into hateful ideology. I don't think that that's an appropriate response, but I can also understand where it comes from and that that's worth thinking through. And the resentment towards the hateful ideology then causes people to push them away again and fuel back into these stereotypes of, oh, well, they're stupid and they're bad people. And so we have to not think about what they're offering because you can't trust it. And so that makes them feel more excluded and so on and so forth. And we get into this terrible dynamic that no one can break out of. And I feel like my experience has made it impossible for me to shake this question as being as complicated as it is because, you know, I'm born into such a community with an academic

interest. So like, you know, at three, four or five years old, I'm already alienated from a community because I like books, right? Like the degree to which these abstract dynamics have seeped into social relationships is really alarming. And I think the conversation around polarization in the United States and especially this supposed dynamic between the quote unquote white poor and the rest of the world, the rest of the social justice project is totally confused because there are enormous issues of sexual violence and extreme bigotry against people of color who live within these communities, not just outside of them increasingly. That are just getting left out of the narrative. We're letting a few white men do all the talking for what's happened to these communities and to tell the world that their anger is justified. And I think there's a kernel of truth to that. But I also think there are other voices that are being left out of this that can help explain a lot of the emotions that are driving things like conspiracy theories. And so, you know, I don't claim to have all of them or be a representative of all of them, but I think more people who come from these bizarre intersections, where they've experienced what it is to be represented as a stereotype, even before they're a full-blown knower or political agent themselves, that that might help us work through some of what's going on. Because those are the people who have the double-speak thing down. They can understand what some of the other possible meanings of these seemingly irrational positions might be gesturing towards and help us address those worries, the real worries, instead of trying to solve a problem by saying, oh, here, let's give you more evidence. Oh, why doesn't it change your mind? Because, well, that's not really what you cared about in the first place, right? So for me, it's really just about being with people and trying to not just say, you know, you've been through something hard and that makes all of this okay. It doesn't. There are a lot of responsibility issues on the table, but it's going to be messy. There's not going to be a clean like this team gets to worry about these issues and this team gets to worry about those issues and we'll work on it separately. We're going to have to come together and confront this gunk at some point. So that's perhaps in a slightly different direction, but that's kind of like, the conversation and also the experience that's motivating me here.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks for that. Yuya, same question. Who are the big thinkers? How does being a philosopher help you think through critical media literacy in the way that you are?

Yuya Takeda Yeah. Well, although we are seeing sort of a proliferation of educational literature on conspiracy theories in recent years, because it's kind of like foregrounded in the public discourse, it's a topic that has not been discussed sufficiently. And when it is discussed, it's usually in the context of a means and disinformation. And in talking about those things, most discussion of digital media literacy in school curricula focus on teaching students about importance of fact-checking, identification of information sources, evaluation of credibility, and so forth, as you suggested earlier, Derek. And I agree, these are certainly important things to teach. And I think it should be part of the media literacy teaching. But I think critical media literacy needs to go beyond that. And it's because I see literacy to be fundamentally about participation in meaning making. And the critical of critical media literacy has to do with politics. So because it's concerned with political elements of literacy, critical media literacy education should address certain questions like, for example, who does this demarcation of the information from miss and disinformation? If we are delegating that authority to experts, how do

we do it in such a way that is aligned with democratic values? Like Michaila has been suggesting. And, you know, I see that in the times of crisis like climate change and global pandemic, it's very tempting to appeal to the technocratic and epistocratic forms of decision making because, you know, we can't entertain, we don't have much time and we need to make decisions quickly. But we seem to be strongly disposed to think that truth is self-evident and the purer the facts we distill, the smarter the decision we can make. And I see that to be a product of a scientism. And I believe critical media literacy education can do a lot in foregrounding the elements of meanings and values that are central in thinking about production and operationalization of knowledge. So to explore this kind of argument, I recommend reading the works in a political epistemology that's a field that concerns about the roles of experts in democracy and so on. The book I particularly find particularly helpful is written by a German philosopher, Lisa Hartog. She published a book recently called *Citizen Knowledge*. I drew a lot from her work for the paper I'm presenting at BS.

Derek Gottlieb Thanks very much for that.

Cara Furman Thank you. We always love direct book recommendations. So we're going to turn to a few more direct recommendations. And I want to give a tiny example and then get your advice on this. So when you were talking about being able to trust or listen to the sense in somebody's argument, which I heard Ksenia and Michaila, you both talking about, you didn't use quite that language. This happened last night at bedtime. I was talking to my four-year-old about the languages that his father speaks and his father speaks Spanish and English fluently. And my children have been watching a lot of Godzilla movies that take place in Japan and have subtitles. And my husband has been watching these movies with my children. And my son says, you know, daddy knows so much, he can speak all kinds of languages, including Japanese. And I, so an example of this would be, I sort of was like, that's ridiculous and that doesn't make any sense. But in that moment, even though I was tired, I said, well, Why are you, why do you think daddy can speak Japanese? What evidence do you, because he was insisting very firmly and he said, well, because when the people talk in the movie in Japanese, daddy says what it means. And so I kind of chuckled and I called into my husband who was with my other child in the other room and my seven year old said, no, no, no, no, daddy doesn't speak Japanese. He can read Japanese. And, you know, because again, he had the knowledge to know that my husband was reading, but he didn't know what language he was reading in. So to me, that's kind of an example of a way in which sort of probing a little more to say, well, tell me where that came from is one way in which we can kind of understand better where a theory is coming from. Can you give, each of you give a kind of practical suggestion, maybe, because any is starting with you because of your classroom experience in the English classroom. What may you do as a teacher, either to talk about conspiracy or just to talk to your students that might be promoting ways of knowing that fit with the ethic of your paper? What should we do be doing?

Ksenia Filatov Yeah, I think I'll probably take a different angle to this. And I have been thinking as through as this conversation progressed, I have been thinking about what, what I would do in the classroom, knowing what I know now. And I think, and this is going to be very, like concrete, but when we talking about like, evaluating sources is sort of one dimension, but I

think carefully passing how different news narratives evolve in their construction of in their explanations of events as more information comes to light. So I think these are really important case studies to undertake. So how was this newspaper and this newspaper talking about this event before they knew or before they saw the revelation? insert here, I don't know, weapons of mass destruction conspiracy there, whatever, and how they talked about it after. What, you know, where do we see perspective where do we see, where might we see elements of posturing or identifying or trying to downplay, you know, revelations that emerge, because you see that all the time. Certain facts, as far as speaking of facts, certain facts seem not to be matters of concern for certain communities, while they are for others. And so like, thinking about that really carefully by playing out a very almost like longitudinal serious study of a case that's either in the recent past or you know hopefully in the recent past where you really show your students that this is complicated. It's not simply a matter of trusting this new source and being more suspicious of this new source. It's absolutely not. This is like okay let's let's start with a raw data that we're presented with like this leak of a diplomatic cable essay. And let's see how it's being reported across the board. What matters of like what concerns might be motivating this and that angle in how this has been reported? Why is this newspaper not covering the story at all? So I think media literacy today is way more demanding. It's way more complicated. But also, we have access to more such contrasting cases as citizens than we ever have in the past. So I think there's, you know, benefits and drawbacks, but I think it should really be more of a serious scholarly task. We need to show our students that things are not always as they seem. Things are complicated. Let's examine reporting around a real conspiracy that actually took place before we knew about it and after and maybe about some of these others about which, you know, which are unfounded, perhaps, though we don't yet have evidence about them. What's going on here? There's similarities and differences. So I think quite a lot more serious study like that of primary sources, secondary sources.

Cara Furman That's great. I really like the idea of looking holistically and over time at a topic like that. I think that's really helpful. Yuya, how would you enter into implications?

Yuya Takeda Yes, thank you. I think your story is fascinating. Two things I have in mind now. One thing is the importance of participation in reasoning. Like your children explained why they thought their dad speaks Japanese or can read Japanese. And this was a moment of articulation of why they thought it was the case. And just by making those reasons explicit, it creates a possibility for to correct the understanding about the world or in this situation that's proficiency in certain languages. So I think we can teach as we engage in this critical reading and writing of the world, we can invite students in participating in this articulation. One's refusal to participate in reasoning, which seems to be something that happens when we sort of engage in debate or dialogue with conspiracy theorists, which happened to me personally, too. When I asked for reasons, some of them respond, do your own research and so on. And then the conversation stops and we can't identify where the disparity in the worldview is coming from. So showing where you are from the participation in reasoning, I think it's an important kind of like posture attitude to teach. Another point is a little more abstract, but it's about partiality of our views. None of us have this impartial view of the world, and so this paying attention to the audio, if you are unable to read, you can't... tell which language it is that your dad is reading. So those

kind of like our limitations and perspectives lead us to infer certain things perhaps in the wrong direction. But And it's kind of like attempting for us to look for impartial view about the world, but that's a romantic project. Even scientists do not have impartial view, truly objective perspective about the world. like Thomas Kuhn's work and so on, the paradigm normal science, there is certain elements of the theory informing our observations. And there's a kind of bidirectional relationship between theory and concept and observation. So what I want to say here is that, well, our perspectives are always partial. We can't reach completely impartial perspective. What do we do with it? We need certain systems, institutions and learning about the process of producing objectivity. What kind of procedure we have to make our knowledge claims more objective as possible. And learning about those things teaching students about how institutions function. I think it's important here.

Cara Furman

Thank you so much. And Michaila.

Michaila Peters

Yeah. So I guess I would start with, I think the question we've all been circling around is how to cultivate a functional amount of trust in our media landscape is sort of the million dollar question. And I think it comes from a couple of things. I think the first one is not allowing people to just face the situation with so much fear, you know, like we can't shy away from the complexity. That's the world that we're in. And there aren't going to be, you know, or firewalls to avoid being deceived or making partial judgments. As Yuya is saying, that's who we are. That's what it is to be human. The very title of Ksenia's and I's paper that we landed on is Facing Epistemic Uncertainty. And so I think we need to empower students both to have a certain number of resources, sure, to navigate complicated informational situations. but also empower their voices because of so much of what is driving conspiracy theories and especially problematic conspiracy theories is this feeling that one doesn't have a voice, then that's part of what we need to be doing to combat that vulnerability continuing to drive this dynamic. So when I teach at Boston College, I've seen a lot of similar tendencies in students for the first task of not having them fear complexity where when they encounter an op-ed or something, you know, as Ksenia is suggesting, if you lead them through a piece and start talking about, okay, which of these claims seem reasonable? What's the expertise of this person? Let's do a little digging about the author, you know, like what maybe falls outside of that range? What are maybe challenges that we could pose to some of their premises? How do they follow through? The first dynamic that I see in students that's really worrying is any time they encounter emotion in a piece. or what they call subjective, it's like this big magical term these days, or opinion. It's like, okay, I can't trust it anymore, gotta move on, gotta go hunt the objectivity. So as Yuya was saying, objectivity is not this perfect tool that somehow the right ordained people can say, oh yes, this counts, right? This is good enough, this is rational enough. Students need to embrace emotion with a question of what's behind it, right? To have more complex readings of it. And I think we've had a world that both creates very intense emotions in our very media landscape that profits off of driving them and then also teaches us to fear them. And these two things cannot live together forever. We have to be able to learn how to relate to each other as humans and talk about like, okay, if there is an emotion that's outsized, how much of that is the responsibility of the person and how much of this may be an unanswered question bit of digging on, which we can't if we don't have trust in the first place. And so Cassani and I in our

paper, we suggest that students maybe share experiences from their own lives where they've encountered difficult informational dilemmas and talk through best practices because at the end of the day, that's kind of what we're doing. It's a very like Aristotelian virtue project, right? There are like certain situations where we have a kind of sensibility about one kind of emotional response over another. And when we enlarge our perspectives and we share those experiences, we may learn something. And then that may come back into mind later on and also make you feel a little less incapable, I guess, or unprepared if you find yourself in a situation where you're unsure because you'll just accept it as being human. And I think the second thing is from a much larger scale, sort of the 3000 foot view, which is that so many of the underserved high schools that I've worked in with different projects and also my own high school, they're not encouraging students to sort of like speak from their own perspective or to value their voice, to value their judgment about how and when to trust different people. And they're really smart, right? So like investing in schools, whole in the schools that suffer the most from funding are often the ones who also put all of this pressure and focus on standardized testing and science and everything about school. And there's no space to show up as a human being and to share the testimony and the lived wisdom that they have about navigating often the most complicated situations. So I think like philosophy for children or other programs that invite critical discourse into the classroom. And we're not trying to police it. We're not trying to create this perfect system of here's how you can know what biases are happening and pick it out, right? But just to show up and be willing to make mistakes and learn from each other. would help a lot to diffuse these situations. And the same goes for if the issue is having a politically salient platform on down the line, teaching people that op-eds aren't just for these experts who decide to be public intellectuals, that they too can make use of these resources, or if social media is the new thing, whatever is the new thing, that they have every right to show up there and to voice a concern as anybody else. how we kind of restructure an information landscape to make those channels more accessible and maybe more powerful in terms of moving policy or public discourse. That's a much larger question, but I think at least showing students the tools that we have that we know are available and presenting them in things that they're entitled to and worthy of is super important.

Ksenia Filatov Just one thing, if I could append my statement from previously, I was just thinking about how my previous experience, teaching experience involved working for four years in a United World College. In that college, we had students from up to 90 different countries in any given cohort. And so, you know, the age between 16 and 19. And what you have in a space like that, 90 different experiences of different information landscapes, cry to coming together. And so you not only have a mix of concerns, right, that are historically and culturally embedded, but you also have a very different mix of facts at our disposal, facts that feature in our reasoning and in the formation of our worldview. And one thing I found through that experience and through coming to the United States is that there are so many facts we don't share and those are actually critical to our perspective on the world. And so even just like as a critical literacy project to make sure that you as an educator is taking responsibility for expanding your own fact base, right? That you have been reading widely, different media perspectives from different countries. And that you are bringing that world of perspective into the classroom. And that's something that I tried to do in my class as well, that I taught to my

undergraduates at BC. And it was you know, like for the first time, they had heard that America had dropped bombs on this or that country, you know, or that or that they had interfered, you know, that the CIA had interfered with this or that country's democratic process. This was for them a first, right. And so just recognizing that there are certain information flows that are we just do not have access to if we solely rely on, you know, the mainstream information as it's called in this philosophy garden project that we're responding to.

Cara Furman Yeah. Thank you so much.

Michaila Peters I also just want to quickly respond to something Derek put in the chat for those that can't see, which is how weird to hear an Aristotelian virtue perspective. And the reason that this strikes me is because how quickly I think philosophers have forgotten that when Miranda Fricker first proposed the idea of epistemic justice right it was always meant to be from a virtues perspective because we're talking about trying to develop sensibilities towards an ideal of trust in building communities as knowers where we're not driving it apart through biases. It was always meant to be by relying on these other kinds of knowing that aren't purely rational. They're about showing up in embodied situations and feeling it out and getting better at it through experience and what Ksenia is saying, enlarging our experience through history, through other channels, through broader communities. Not just a VC thing, although a VC thing.

Derek Gottlieb Virtuous listening. To be clear, there's both a teasing aspect to that, be like, oh, wow, weird. A place in which there's a great deal of interest in explicitly, not secondarily in Aristotelian virtue ethics, but also coming out of my own curiosity and growing sense of who's interested in what where. I'm not trying to knock an interest in virtue perspective. More of a plug.

Cara Furman Yes, there, let's do it like that.

Derek Gottlieb Perfect. Cara?

Cara Furman So I'm gonna close with a plug to say that this has been a fascinating conversation and I'm so excited that it gets to continue in various forms in person in just a few weeks. And thank you so much for such a beautiful move between your experiences and your reading and some more experiences and some more reading and what we might do about it. So really, thank you very much for all of that.

Ksenia Filatov Thank you.

Michaila Peters This was really fun. Thank you so much for having us. See you in Salt Lake City. Thank you very much.

Derek Gottlieb And that's the show. Thanks once more to our guests for taking the time to share their work with us, and thanks as well to all of you for listening. Subscribe to the

podcast, as we always say, wherever you have found us, and giving us a rating and a review helps others find us as well. If you've got specific feedback for us, you can reach Kara and I together at thinkinginthemidstatgmail.com, and if you've got a recommendation, including a self-recommendation, for future guests and episode topics, please use the form linked in the episode description. After a month or so of furious production in advance of PES, we're switching back to our regular pace, which means that our next episode, featuring a great discussion with Chris Mayo and Elizabeth Payne on LGBTQ plus students and organizing in schools under our current climate of rights retrenchment, will come out on March 15th. Hope to see some of you at PES in Salt Lake City between now and then. And if not, for Cara Furman, I'm Derek Gottlieb, and we'll see you next time.