

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Rethinking Education Policy and Methodology in a Post-truth Era**

education policy analysis  
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 26 Number 147

November 19, 2018

ISSN 1068-2341

**Appropriated Literacies: The Paradox of Critical Literacies,  
Policies, and Methodologies in a Post-truth Era**

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**Citation:** Bacon, C. K. (2018). Appropriated literacies: The paradox of critical literacies, policies, and methodologies in a post-truth era. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(147).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3377> This article is part of the Special Issue, *Rethinking Education Policy and Methodology in a Post-truth Era*, guest edited by Jennifer R. Wolgemuth, Mirka Koro-Ljungberg, Travis M. Marn, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Shaun M. Dougherty.

**Abstract:** Since 2016, there has been a proliferation of discourse around what has come to be called “post-truth.” Much of this discourse references critical literacies as a proposed means by which to disrupt post-truth across educational policy, pedagogy, and methodology. In this paper, I highlight the paradoxical degree of overlap between post-truth and the critical literacy approaches espoused to combat it. Left underexplored, these appropriated literacies may do more to embolden than to dismantle post-truth. I first typify three “first wave” responses to post-truth, exploring the affordances and limitations of each. I then provide recommendations for augmenting these responses through a renewed emphasis on power, domination, and liberation in critical literacies as a response to post-truth.

**Keywords:** Critical literacy; Post-truth; Education policy; Digital literacy

Journal website: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>  
Facebook: /EPAAA  
Twitter: @epaa\_aape

Manuscript received: 9/7/2017  
Revisions received: 9/23/2018  
Accepted: 10/1/2018

**Alfabetizaciones apropiadas: La paradoja de las alfabetizaciones críticas, políticas y metodologías en una era posverdad**

**Resumen:** Desde 2016, ha habido una proliferación de discursos sobre lo que se ha denominado “posverdad.” Gran parte de este discurso hace referencia a las alfabetizaciones críticas como un medio propuesto para interrumpir la posverdad a través de la política educativa, la pedagogía y metodología. En este artículo, resalto el grado paradójico de superposición entre los enfoques de alfabetización posverdad y crítica propugnados para combatirla. Si se deja de explorar, estas alfabetizaciones apropiadas pueden hacer más para envalentonar que dismantelar la posverdad. Primero tipifico tres respuestas de “primera movimiento” a la posverdad, explorando las posibilidades y limitaciones de cada una. Luego ofrezco recomendaciones para aumentar estas respuestas a través de un énfasis renovado en el poder, la dominación y la liberación en las alfabetizaciones críticas como respuesta a la posverdad.

**Palabras-clave:** Alfabetización crítica; Posverdad; Política educativa; Alfabetización digital

**Alfabetizaciones apropiadas: O paradoxo das alfabetizações críticas, políticas e metodologias de uma era pós-verdade**

**Resumo:** Desde 2016, tem havido uma proliferação de discursos sobre o que se denominou “pós-verdade.” A parte de seu discurso tem como referência as palavras-chave como uma proposta de ensino para o ensino pós-graduado a través da política educacional, pedagogia e metodologia. Este artigo é sobre o paradigma da superposição entre as enfoques de alfabetização pós-verdade e crítica propugnados para combatirla. Si se importa de explorar, estas alfabetizaciones apropiadas são mais importantes para envalentar que dismantelam a tarde posterior. Primeiro tipifico tres respuestas de “primera movimiento” a la verdad posterior, explorando as posibilidades e limitaciones de cada una. O primeiro a oferecer recomendações para aumentar as respostas a um novo poder sobre o poder, a dominação e a libertação nas alfabetizações como uma resposta pós-verdade.

**Palavras-chave:** Alfabetização crítica; Pós-verdade; Política educativa; Alfabetização digital

## Introduction

We are loath to admit, but perhaps should have seen coming, the appropriation of critical literacies. By *we*, I refer to a community of scholars, educators, and activists who ground their work in critical pedagogies. By *appropriation*, I reference the ostensible similarities between discourses labeled as *post-truth* and the practices employed through critical literacies. Though the comparison will border on unpalatable for some, grappling with post-truth and its rise to prominence in this specific time and place requires reckoning with the orientations and approaches that bind critical literacies to post-truth. This struggle is particularly salient for educational policy and methodology as critical literacies grow in popularity across educational systems (Edelsky & Cherland, 2006). Such convergence necessitates a productive reckoning around the place of criticality as a response to post-truth.

I begin by defining post-truth through the lens of critical literacies, exploring the conditions that give rise to its current manifestation, and highlighting the appropriation of critical literacies therein. Next, I typify a range of *first wave* responses that are coming to prominence as methods by which to disrupt post-truth. I then discuss the affordances and limitations of these responses with a lens toward power, domination, and liberation to augment further responses. Though these actions

will not, in and of themselves, “solve” the issue of post-truth, my hope is that this critique will help to disrupt the appropriation of critical literacies and to highlight the epistemological commitments that separate critical literacies from post-truth.

## **Constructing Post-Truth: Continuations & Appropriations**

In naming post-truth its word of the year, *Oxford English Dictionaries* described the phrase as “denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (OED, 2016). The phrase was not entirely new—used as early as 1992 in relation to journalism (Hartley, 1992), and was even identified as an “era” of U.S. politics in 2004 (Keyes, 2004). However, OED identified a 2,000% increase in usage of the term between 2015 and 2016, largely in relation to the UK’s “Brexit” campaign and the rise of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency (OED, 2016). These events coincided with a spike in usage of the phrase *fake news*—variously used to denote actual falsehood or to undermine information deemed inconvenient to those in power—and the Trump administration’s coining of the term *alternative facts* in early 2016 (Sinderbrand, 2017). While distinct in their usage, these phrases are brought together under the umbrella of “post-truth” to reference the general phenomena of distorting reality, often with little consequence, for the purpose of political gain.

Scholars and media critics have been quick to point out that the phenomenon of truth-bending for political purposes is as old as politics itself (Ball, 2017; D’Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017). Hoaxes and defamation have long accompanied politics (K. Young, 2017), particularly in the US, where widespread deception of the public by political leaders features prominently in the nation’s history (Arendt, 1971). What ostensibly differentiates the current era of post-truth is a seeming lack of any consequence when untruths are revealed (Sismondo, 2017). Truth is not just obscured, but seems rendered irrelevant. Post-truth also manifests as mistrust in established institutions, including government, academia, and scientific consensus. Arguably stemming from the failures of these institutions to counter growing economic inequalities (Navarro, 2007; McLaren, 2003; Peters, 2018), this mistrust has played a key role in eroding societal deference toward institutions traditionally perceived as sites of knowledge production.

### **Degrees of Overlap: Critical Literacies Meets Post-Truth**

It is here that the surface-level similarities between post-truth and critical literacies begin to emerge. Critical literacies promote questioning established knowledge and institutions through reading, writing, and textual interpretation (Bartolomé, 2004; Janks, 2014; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Morrell, 2008; Shor, 1999). Drawing from a broad range of critical traditions, including Marxist, feminist, and poststructural critiques, critical literacies have historically sought to problematize top-down relationships between knowledge producers and consumers (i.e. teachers and students) and to promote social activism through literacy (Tyson, 2006). Generally drawing a lineage to the work of Brazilian educator and activist, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), critical literacies are often described as “reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Though no one definition or set of features constitutes critical literacies, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesized a range of definitions in the field to include four broad dimensions: “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

Critical literacies are often invoked as a mechanism to combat post-truth. However, when considering critical literacies’ “explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, and institutions and political systems” (Luke, 2012, p. 5) a paradoxical degree of overlap emerges between these goals and those of post-truth discourse. For example, one

rarely considers scientific consensus on climate change as one of the “dominant ideologies” to be questioned through critical literacies. Yet, those denying human-driven climate change defend their position using the language of criticality. The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, for example, published the “Minority Report: Critical Thinking on Climate Change” in 2013 to dispute calls for government to regulate carbon emissions. The report uses the motif of “questions for critical thinking” to refute scientific data on carbon dioxide, which the report describes as “an otherwise naturally occurring gas that makes the process of photosynthesis and life on earth possible.” (2013, p. 1). Analyzing the document through the Lewison et al. framework, one could reasonably argue that the report fits the description of critical literacy in action—disrupting the commonplace [consensus on human-caused climate change]; interrogating multiple viewpoints [on climate data]; focusing on sociopolitical issues [of consequences from proposed environmental regulations]; and taking action and promoting social justice [by opposing regulations said to disproportionately affect the “developing world” and “low-income households” (2013, p. 19-20)]. The question then becomes—what separates the skepticism of institutionalized knowledge advocated through critical literacies from that of post-truth? This is a question the field must be able to answer and articulate.

Some will argue that actual veracity is the difference. However, as I will argue throughout this piece, “truth” has never been solely a matter of factuality. Truth has always been an issue of power and who has the ability to produce and distribute “facts” in the first place. Analyzing power in this way is a cornerstone of critical literacies. However, approaches to combatting post-truth through critical literacies tend to emphasize dichotomies of truth vs. falsehood over substantive power-analysis. “Reading” post-truth solely through a lens of true/false binaries does little to combat core issues of power, dominance, and liberation, which are essential in differentiating critical literacies from post-truth.

### **Redefining Post-truth**

In light of this context, I offer an alternative definition of post-truth. For the purpose of this paper, I argue that post-truth can be productively understood as *criticality disconnected from larger discourses of power, domination, and liberation*. Throughout the piece, I use the term *cosmetic criticality* to denote a knee-jerk skepticism toward institutions and scientific consensus that has come to be erroneously described as “critical.” On the surface, this cosmetic criticality appears to share many of the more popularized features of critical literacies (i.e. features of the Lewison et al. framework outlined above). However, unmoored from explicit discussions of power, domination, and liberation, cosmetic criticality is easily appropriated by post-truth discourses to maintain rather than to disrupt existing power hierarchies. The potent, and largely successful appropriation of criticality by post-truth discourse calls for re-examining the notion of criticality across educational pedagogy, policy, and method.

### **Backlash: Conditions of Appropriation**

It is important to first explore the conditions that facilitated the appropriation of criticality in an era of post-truth. Paradoxically, the rise of post-truth may owe much to the democratization of information access and the popularization of critical literacies. These revolutions, in their own way, contributed toward a de-centralization of truth, disrupting previously held monopolies on information. Such shifts were largely beneficial. However, left undertheorized, or rather, approached *uncritically*, they also contribute to the emergence and sustained influence of post-truth.

## **Textual Revolutions**

The first condition of appropriation has been a backlash from institutions of power against technologies that democratize access to texts and their production. Revolutions in information access are regularly met with such backlash. The printing press, for example, facilitated mass-production and rapid distribution of texts in 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but also drove a spike in censorship from governmental and religious authorities (Demers, 2007). More recently, the digital revolution intersected with an age of widespread literacy to produce a disruption in the way knowledge was both consumed *and produced*. With droves of information accessible by a growing number of users, expertise on a topic could literally reside in one's pocket. What's more, the ability to produce and distribute texts online allowed many writers to surmount traditional gatekeepers of the publication process.

As such, the supposed rise of post-truth at this moment in history is not a coincidence. It's not that society has suddenly become averse to truth, or that individuals are somehow less intelligent consumers of text than those of previous generations. In actuality, global literacy rates are higher than at any point in world history (UNESCO, 2017)—post-truth is a backlash against this new reality. If we agree with Foucault (1995) that knowledge and power are inseparable, then with such widespread access to facts, it was only a matter of time until hegemonic institutions sought to undermine “truth” itself.

## **Criticality *en Vogue***

A second condition of appropriation has been the popularization of critical literacies. A fringe movement of radical intent in its early years, approaches to literacy deeming themselves “critical” have become nearly ubiquitous in recent decades across a range of contexts. Critical literacies have grown to prominence as the “dominant literacy paradigm” in parts of Australia (Allison, 2011, p. 182). In North America, the proliferation of critical literacies as an educational pedagogy has led to what Edelsky and Cherland deemed “the popularity effect” (2006, p. 17)—a watering down through overextension of usage. Approaches grounded in “critical thinking” have grown to prominence in a range of global contexts, but generally eschew interrogation of larger social power structures beyond a text itself (Bacon, 2017). With similar “critical” approaches embraced within educational policy and written into curricular standards, including the U.S. Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards, one would, in fact, be hard pressed to find a recent approach to literacy that did not reference some degree of criticality as a necessary component of its method.

This overextension of critical literacies lays the groundwork for *cosmetic criticality*. Under these conditions, critical literacies become a set of skills rather than a philosophical orientation—a *method* rather than a *methodology*. When simplified as set of steps or standards, cosmetic criticality evinces a knee-jerk skepticism toward established knowledge—simply “being critical” unmoored from any larger epistemological or philosophical commitments. This disconnect is particularly troubling as popularized conceptual labels divorced from their theoretical contexts are granted a sort of “conceptual immunity” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 21) in political and academic discourse. Such immunity promotes the illusion that certain methods—banal in their ubiquity—can be generalized casually across contexts. As a result, approaches to literacy that espouse criticality, however cosmetic, become difficult to interrogate. Critical literacies' characteristic skepticism toward dominant ideologies is thus left open for appropriation by post-truth discourse to obstruct, rather than to facilitate, movements toward liberatory practice.

## Appropriated Literacies

These implications are brought into stark relief as critical approaches to literacy are increasingly introduced into spaces of privilege (Bacon, 2015). Those who work with critical pedagogies in such contexts note that readers are apt to identify with the “oppressed” (Freire, 1970) and disparage “oppressors” while ignoring their own complicity in maintaining systems of oppression. This leads to what Allen (2002) called “a delusional space where everyone is the oppressed and no one is the oppressor” (p. 4). While this interpretation generally renders critical literacies, at worst, banal or ineffective, post-truth narratives have come to employ similar logic to nefarious fruition—with mantle of “oppression” being appropriated by privileged groups to validate perceived grievances, and even to justify acts of violence (Kolber, 2017; Szilágyi, 2017).

Post-truth, therefore, works on a dual front. On one hand, it is undeniable that there has been much discursive work by those in power to obfuscate truth. On the other hand, cosmetic criticality has watered down the revolutionary substance of critical literacies. Therefore, addressing this dual front involves interrogating blatant falsehood while simultaneously reckoning with the cosmetic criticality that sustains post-truth. In the next section, I illustrate this case by exploring how cosmetic criticality manifests across a range of “first wave” responses that have gained traction as methods by which to address post-truth.

## First Wave Responses

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive review of emerging responses to post-truth, I discuss some of their common characteristics below to explore the current conditions of discourse on post-truth. To inform my analysis, I sought a range of “first wave” responses—which I define as policies, pedagogies, and practices invoked to address post-truth published between 2016 and 2018. Prioritizing material available to practitioners and policymakers, I chose three popular online periodicals (*Education Week*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Edutopia*) as well as two literacy practitioner organization websites (the *National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]* and the *International Literacy Association [ILA]*). I selected these sources based on circulation, range of target audiences, and open access options. However, these sources should not be understood as encompassing the wealth of online resources and educational publications discussing post-truth. Still, these sources offer a sample to begin exploring emergent discourses on post-truth in educational spaces.

I searched the online databases of each source using the terms *post-truth*, *fake news*, and *alternative facts*. I then narrowed the search results to articles in which authors specifically discussed ways to address post-truth and its related manifestations. This search elicited a total of 73 articles. I reviewed each article based on three criteria: (1) how the article constructs post-truth as a problem, (2) proposed responses, and (3) the implications of each type of response for education policy and methodology. I then grouped the articles by similarities in their approach (i.e. articles with comparable problem/response relationships). This process resulted in three thematic groups, which I labeled to reflect their primary orientation toward addressing post-truth: (1) *Critical Reading*, (2) *Critical Consumerism*, and (3) *Critical Empathy*. These groupings are necessarily contingent, as discourse around post-truth continues to evolve. While there are certainly spaces of incompleteness and overlap between the groupings, they offer one way to map out current framings of post-truth responses for further analysis. I briefly introduce each group below, outlining problem constructions, responses, and implications for educational policy and methodology. A featured illustration is provided within each group. I then discuss the affordances and limitations of these first wave responses to post-truth in the following section.

## **Response Group 1: Critical Reading**

This group of first wave responses specifically use the term “critical” to discuss approaches to reading and questioning texts as a way to respond to post-truth. Some of these approaches reference critical literacies specifically, but most rely on generalizations around reading or thinking critically that largely manifest as cosmetic criticality. I labeled this response group *critical reading* for its emphasis on how individuals read a specific text. These approaches generally involve questioning a text, determining an author’s credibility, or speculating on an authors’ intended purpose or audience.

**Problem construction.** For responses grounded in critical reading, the issues around post-truth stem from the fact that all texts are political. Every author writes from a particular perspective with a particular purpose. These responses reckon with the fact that printed texts are granted heightened authority, especially in educational settings where students are primarily exposed to textbooks as a key arbiter of knowledge. Through this framing, therefore, responding to post-truth involves discerning whether or not a particular text should be granted authoritative legitimacy.

**Proposed responses.** Critical reading responses prioritize the evaluation of texts, authors, and evidence. The theory of change undergirding this response posits that readers who can approach texts with a certain degree of skepticism will be less susceptible to the influence of post-truth. In critical reading approaches, therefore, readers are guided to exercise their abilities in questioning a text, researching its author, and discerning degrees of authorial bias.

**Featured illustration.** Kiili and Wennås Brante (2017) suggested monthly quiz activities to evaluate students’ critical reading skills. In an article for the International Literacy Association (ILA), the authors advised teachers to choose a topic of media controversy, then to find four relevant texts that vary in their intended purpose and quality of analysis. Teachers would then prepare multiple choice questions to address four domains: “[1] Authors’ expertise on the topic... [2] Purpose of the text... [3] Quality of evidence ... [4] A main point of the text (e.g., a question to assess important content)” (Kiili & Wennås Brante, 2017, n.p.). Kiili and Wennås Brante suggested teachers use these quizzes to spark further conversations and to observe how students’ critical reading skills develop from quiz to quiz.

**Implications.** Critical reading responses frame post-truth as an issue of an individual’s discernment skills. It follows that, like the example above, this response emphasizes evaluating individual student abilities in their readiness to question a text and its author. The most common skillset assessed across these approaches involves determining what counts as “expertise” and “quality” of evidence. This method generally results in a binary evaluation in which texts either “pass” as fully authoritative or are invalidated as untrustworthy. The relatively straightforward, assessable nature of this approach draws a receptive audience in educational policy and practice. Since the notion of criticality is defined broadly, it often falls on individual teachers to determine the discrete set of skills by which critical reading can be enacted and assessed.

## **Response Group 2: Critical Consumerism**

While critical reading prioritizes the questioning of texts or authors, critical consumerism emphasizes evaluation of *sources*, such as specific websites or news networks. These approaches often involve discerning a source’s validity, with a particular focus on “fake news” and information spread through social media. Though popularized since 2016, these approaches echo anxieties that have



been brought forth throughout the emergence of digital and social media (Harouni, 2009; Johnson & Kaye, 2000).

**Problem construction.** Critical consumerism frames post-truth as stemming from a suggested inability for consumers to evaluate a source's validity, particularly in online spaces. According to this view, uninformed consumers share or spread false information to others who may have a similar inability to evaluate its veracity and will continue to spread the information. In this way, critical consumerism emphasizes the role of "fake news" and its spread online as the most salient issue in enabling post-truth discourse.

**Proposed responses.** Critical consumerism prioritizes establishing a set of criteria for what constitutes a legitimate source, then building consumers' awareness around these features. This process generally involves encouraging individuals to scrutinize sources, suggesting ways to evaluate online sources, such as researching a source's funders, or consulting a list of "reputable" news sources. In pedagogical contexts, students are guided in how to conduct research online, while simultaneously researching a source itself. In addition, critical consumerism places a dual emphasis on the role of individual consumers and social networks themselves to curate and block the spread of false information.

**Featured illustration.** Lists and fact checking websites feature prominently in critical consumerism responses. Zimdars (2016), for example, grew concerned with her university students' use of non-credible sources and began to curate a list of *False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical "News" Sources*. The list, which Zimdars shared online for open access and described in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Dreid, 2016), included the names of over 1,000 irreputable websites. Zimdars also provided general tips for fake news detection, such as "websites that end in '.com.co'" or "Bad web design and use of ALL CAPS" (Zimdars, 2016, p.1). The document has been shared more than 25,000 times since its creation.

**Implications.** As the name of this grouping implies, "consumerism" becomes the operative issue in these responses. Sources, or "brands," become the key arbiters of reputability, rather than authors or content of a text itself. Truth, therefore, becomes a commodity prioritized to differing degrees across various sources. As all of these sources are bound to particular corporations or interests, truth becomes only as useful as it is profitable or popular. Critical consumerism also shifts the onus of combatting post-truth from individual to corporation, as has been seen with calls for social networks themselves to curate and/or censor information deemed to be fake (Shahani, 2018).

### Response Group 3: Critical Empathy

Critical empathy calls readers to engage with perspectives that differ from their own. While critical consumerism promotes discernment and selectivity in sources, critical empathy asks readers to intentionally vary the sources with which they interact. Critical empathy suggests readers reflect on degrees of bias that exist in the sources they interact with most often, then encourages readers to "reach out" beyond those spaces to engage with different perspectives. An oft-cited example involves readers of more "liberal" news sources engaging with more "conservative" news sources and vice versa.

**Problem construction.** In critical empathy discourse, the digital era has not delivered on the promise of a democratic plurality of information sharing. Rather, this era has resulted in isolationism with readers and writers carving out like-minded networks. Critical empathy thus problematizes readers' tendency—when presented with the overwhelming choice of media



available in the digital age—to seek out opinions that align with what they already believe (Nickerson, 1998). This phenomenon manifests through selective social networking (both on and offline) through which individuals can largely avoid information that does not align with their chosen worldview. In framing the problem as such, critical empathy responses use terms like “bubbles” or “echo chambers” to describe such online and social spaces, and implicates these spaces as key sites for the proliferation of post-truth discourse.

**Proposed responses.** Critical empathy approaches help readers identify the sources they most often rely on, such as specific news or media sites, and to determine how much these sources “lean” to one part of the political spectrum or another. Individuals are then encouraged to intentionally seek out perspectives that skew a different direction. The theory of change embedded in critical empathy maintains that, if enough individuals engage with perspectives they would not normally interact with, (a) post-truth narratives will lose their potency through fact checking and engaging with different perspectives and (b) some degree of middle ground can be reached in polarized political discourse.

**Featured illustration.** Giordano (2017) wanted her middle school students to be able to use critical literacy in detecting news bias. However, she was aware of “how much pushback [she] would get if any “right” or “left” news sources were identified as [biased]” (Giordano, 2017, n.p.). Rather than identifying right/left bias for her students based on her own views, Giordano used an external resource to accomplish that goal, suggesting Otero’s (2017) *Media Bias Chart*. This widely-shared chart of media sources on a bell curve with a left/right x-axis and a poor/high quality y-axis. As a pedagogical practice, Giordano suggested having students read about a current event from sources on at least three different places on the spectrum, then debrief about differences they noticed.

**Implications.** Critical empathy relies on the presence and accessibility a broad range of perspectives, media, and source material. Readers will, therefore, benefit from having access to a wide variety of texts and information sources that represent diverse viewpoints, and from intentionally engaging with these materials. Prioritizing reflexivity, critical empathy necessitates initial steps towards interrogation of one’s own bias. However, a broader epistemological implication of critical empathy is a push toward bias-equivalency—with readers working to find “middle ground” between two perspectives, regardless of how extreme, or outright false, one or the other viewpoint may be. Thus, critical empathy, taken as an end in and of itself, may do more to legitimize post-truth than do disrupt it, a limitation I will explore further below.

## **Discussion: From First to Second Wave Responses**

The first wave responses represent important initial steps in responding to post-truth. Indeed, the range of approaches discussed above equip students, teachers, and researchers with necessary tools, especially for grappling with the more flagrant manifestations of post-truth (i.e. fraudulent news websites). However, across this spectrum of approaches, there remains an emphasis on generalized skepticism or disproving blatant falsehood. Analysis of the power dynamics that have been foundational to critical literacy since its inception remain scarce or absent altogether.

I began this piece by defining post-truth as *criticality disconnected from larger discourses of power, domination, and liberation*. In analyzing the first wave responses to post-truth, it becomes clear that they too are largely unmoored from substantive analysis of these larger discourses. In particular, there is little first wave attention to foundational questions of how literacy can be used to maintain or disrupt existing social, political, and material inequities. What follows is an inability for the first wave

responses to gain traction in addressing imbalances in human relations (power), exploitation of this imbalance (dominance), and ways to disrupt these systems (liberation) through literacy.

Dynamics of power, domination, and liberation were clearly present in early work of critical literacies. As implied by the name critical *literacies*, reading, writing, and textual analysis were indeed the tools chosen to disrupt systems of domination. However, foundational texts in critical literacies, such as Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), never marked literacy as an end goal, but as a means toward liberation from structures of oppression. One cannot have oppression without power and domination, and therefore oppression cannot be productively understood without analyzing these systems of imbalance. Today, through the popularization of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and critical literacies more broadly, the emphasis shifted from *oppression* to the more technical—and, from a policy standpoint, more measurable—emphasis on literacy.

As Macedo (2003) argued, “literacy is an eminently political phenomenon, and it must be analyzed within the context of a theory of power relations and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production” (p. 12). In analyzing the first wave responses to post-truth, one finds this explicit examination of power relations to be in conspicuous absence. Therefore, a renewed emphasis on power, dominance, and liberation is imperative to “reading” post-truth, and necessary for any methodology that seeks to address it. This lens—a *second wave* response—can make plain the differences between critical literacies and the appropriations of criticality within post-truth.

### **A Second Wave Response: Analyzing Power, Dominance, and Liberation**

How might a second wave approach shift the framing of post-truth, and how does such a lens augment the first wave responses? In revisiting the analytical categories from the previous section, the lens of power, domination and liberation provides the following shifts in discourse around post-truth.

**Problem construction.** In this framing, the issues germane to “truth” stem not only from factual veracity, author expertise, or source reputability, but also from unequal distributions of power. A second wave response looks less at the *methods* of criticality, which can blur lines between post-truth and critical literacies, and instead focuses on the *goals* of a critical approach. Such an approach asks, “Does this discourse advance the causes of humanization and liberation, or does it function to maintain an inequitable status quo?”

**Proposed responses.** A second wave approach necessitates examining how power and influence are distributed in society, with the explicit end-goal of equitable distribution of these resources. Through this lens, texts can be critiqued in terms of the degree which they advance this goal, as well as the author's (or source's) investments in maintaining or disrupting the status quo. In addition, this analysis can further interrogate the degree to which authors themselves have experienced systems of dominance and marginalization in defining what constitutes an “authoritative” perspective. A second wave response will also emphasize concrete material inequalities (i.e. wealth, land, political representation) to impede the appropriation of criticality by those who maintain disproportionate access to these resources.

**Implications.** Post-truth, when read through a lens of power, domination, and liberation becomes fully legible. This lens reveals post-truth for what it truly is—a phenomenon that has very little to do with veracity itself, or a collective atrophy of discernment, and much to do with the maintenance of established power hierarchies. Through this lens, some conditions of post-truth become rather predictable, such as the topics around which it will arise (movements toward liberation, disruptions of the status quo), the discourses it will employ (appropriations of critical literacies), and attempts to delegitimize facts deemed inconvenient by existing power

structures. This lens begins to reveal the growing influence of post-truth a matter of power rather than reader ability. Researchers and policymakers can move past the current trend—equal parts frustration and fascination with readers’ purported inability to discern fact from falsehood—and move toward a lens that probes investments in and maintenance of established power hierarchies.

**Revisiting first wave illustrations.** Through this lens, many of the first wave responses fall into the realm of cosmetic criticality—sets of skills, practices, or standards devoid of theoretical and political clarity (Freire, 1997). Implemented without deeper interrogation into the power structures that benefit from cosmetic criticality, these approaches may do more to maintain than to combat post-truth. In considering the ways in which these first wave responses will coalesce into a second wave of increasingly cohesive policies, methodologies, and pedagogies around post-truth, it will be important to recognize and unpack their limitations and how these shortcomings might be addressed.

First, as the rise and continued prominence of post-truth demonstrates, we cannot rely fully on vague appeals to “critical” approaches to combat this phenomenon. *Critical reading* responses, for example, have been implemented for decades with growing popularity, yet these approaches have not been able to stave off the growing prominence of post-truth. Appeals to criticality obscure the fact that many post-truth narratives already present as “critical” in their attempts to disrupt mainstream consensus in the interest of power or profit. A second wave response, for example, would question the degree to which a Senate report that seeks to undermine evidence of climate change is influenced more by “critical thinking” or corporate interest.

Likewise, *critical consumerism* has not proven sufficient to address the nature of post-truth in a shifting media landscape. While the approach remains useful for detecting fraudulent sources (e.g. fake or parody news sites), post-truth increasingly blurs the line between fact and fiction *across a range of sources*. It is no longer enough to weed out sources that lack sufficient evidence, as the preponderance of information in the digital age allows evidence to be generated and presented to support a range of predetermined arguments (Best, 2001). Additionally, *critical consumerism* places less emphasis on individuals (the discursive relationship between reader and author) in exchange for trust in particular sources—many of which are beholden to maximizing advertising revenue. Overreliance on critical consumerism may do more to advance the branding of particular sources than to address post-truth. Today’s reliable sources may be tomorrow’s deceptive ones, as networks respond to market forces and shareholder demands. Zimdars’s (2016) list of disreputable websites, for example, has already stopped receiving updates. Many of the listed websites are no longer active, while countless others have risen to take their place. A second wave response makes clear that there will never be a finite, definitive list or criteria that will allow readers to avoid post-truth completely—the tools maintaining systems of dominance will continuously adapt in order to uphold the status quo.

Finally, *critical empathy* makes a degree of headway in encouraging self-reflexivity, but may also set up a false equivalence between all ideological “bubbles.” Critical empathy, taken to its extreme, can be used to legitimize problematic, or even violent, viewpoints. Such bias-equivalence does more to legitimize extremes rather than move toward centrism. In this way, attempts to chart source biases become deceptive in their forced symmetry. The Otero (2017) media bell curve, for example, places *Occupy Democrats*, an website that makes explicit its goal to advance pro-labor and progressive causes in the U.S. Democratic party, as equivalently mirroring *Breitbart* and *Infowars*, right-wing websites known for promoting white supremacist discourse—the latter having been banned from numerous social media sites for violations of

abusive behavior policies (Schneider, 2018). A framework upholding these sources as equivalent is epistemologically flawed. A second wave response problematizes the notion that all sides of political discourse are equally distant from a hypothesized center. Critical empathy may make an admirable gesture toward the idea of “reaching out” to explore different perspectives, but when such viewpoints involve afflictive discourses of racism, misogyny, or homophobia, they cease to be “perspectives” and become structures of violence and dehumanization. A second wave response reveals cases in which “reaching out” does more to legitimize dehumanization than to mitigate it.

### A Return to Freire?

A second wave of responses to post-truth will require revisiting foundational questions of *for whom, by whom, and toward what ends* critical literacies are practiced. Freire was quite clear on the questions of for and by whom:

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (1970, p. 29)

Freire’s insistence that those who have experienced oppression must lead the struggle for liberation should not be taken to mean that the privileged have no role to play whatsoever. However, it does carry the epistemological implication of prioritizing the voices of those who have experienced oppression first hand. Conversely, this prioritization means encountering the use of critical literacies by those who benefit from maintaining established power hierarchies with a healthy degree of skepticism. This directive also moves away from the first wave notion of evaluating an author or source for purported “objectivity” or “lack of bias” (monikers often gained through adherence to the status quo) and toward interrogating investments in systems of dominance instead.

Freire was likewise clear about *to what ends* critical literacies must be practiced—liberation of the oppressed. This charge was not metaphorical. Criticality is not an intellectual exercise meant to generate growth in literacy outcomes or a novel interpretation of a text. Rather, critical literacies are acts of political *praxis* that lead to material improvements among those marginalized by systems of dominance.

Many of the first wave responses seek “truth” as both an end and a means. This pursuit is indeed important, but can become trapped in a circular pattern that remains abstract in its implications. Unmooring critical literacies from its practical ends of liberating those living under oppressive systems opens up spaces for post-truth to appropriate discourses on criticality that remain largely abstract. Asking *to what ends* one seeks to critically interpret a text moves the exercise of critical literacies beyond hypothetical notions. Coming to contingent agreements upon facts and their potential to advance demonstrable improvement in material realities for marginalized populations provides a concrete end for critical literacies (if, and only if, the notion of “improvement” is defined by those experiencing marginalization—again, asking *by whom?*). Interrogating a text’s degree of alignment with conditions likely to democratize access to resources and representation under current systems of dominance, will not, by itself, bring about liberation. However, asking *to what ends* critical literacies are practiced, and aligning those ends with liberatory action, introduces power analysis as a foundational component to combatting post-truth.

It is here that we must also critique the field of critical literacies, the ends it aims to achieve, and the goals it *has* achieved through its popularization. It would be trite, of course, to suggest that a simple “return” to Freire, or any other figure in critical literacies, would “solve” our current quagmires of post-truth. As previously discussed, Freire’s work is nearly as ubiquitous as critical literacy itself, yet post-truth has continued to flourish despite the widespread availability of critical literacies as a pedagogical and methodological resource. One particularly apt critique is the notion of oppression as an essentialized, fixed entity in early works of critical literacies. While there are myriad situations of clear oppressor-oppressed dichotomies, further analysis must bring a more nuanced lens to the ways in which power operates and reproduces across institutions and contexts (Foucault, 1972). The question of *to what ends* remains vague in critical literacy itself, as even the notion of “liberation” can become abstracted, thus leaving space for appropriation by post-truth narratives. A growing body of work in critical pedagogies has called attention to specific contexts in which critical work is enacted (e.g. Asher, 2009; Grande, 2015; Morrell, 2008; Zembylas, 2015), demonstrating the affordances of deconstructing “critical” as an umbrella notion in exchange for an in-depth analysis of distinct axes of oppression enacted in particular contexts among specified populations.

What’s more, there is growing recognition that many ostensibly critical approaches to educational research reify deficit narratives of marginalized communities, constructing individuals and communities through the lens of their oppression rather than the tenacity and hope demonstrated through disrupting—and surviving—oppressive systems (Paris & Winn, 2013; Patel, 2015; Tuck, 2009). Paris (2011), for example, offers a framework of *humanizing research*, which “requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants” (p. 137), a stance that holds promise for disrupting the deficit orientations that often undergird educational research.

However, there may even be limits to a focus on *humanizing* itself. Many approaches to critical literacies continue to center individual human actors as agentive in promoting or disrupting oppressive systems. Decades of scholarship, particularly in the field of critical race theory, has done much to demonstrate the limitations of locating oppression within the beliefs and actions of individuals as opposed to systems and institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; E.Y. Young, 2011). In this way, critical literacies must extend beyond the notion of individual “readers” as the main locus of agency. The field’s ability to reckon with systems and materials as agentive and ideological (e.g. Bridges-Rhoads & Van Cleave, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2016; Kuby & Rowsell, 2017) will be essential in articulating critical literacies in an era of post-truth.

## Conclusion

In 2018, high school students across the U.S. organized school walk outs to protest the government’s inaction on regulating gun control in the wake of pervasive mass shootings. In the midst of nationwide conversations on this “new generation” of political activists, author and English teacher Jennifer Ansbach (2018) tweeted:

I’m not sure why people are so surprised the students are rising up. We’ve been feeding them a steady diet of dystopian literature showing teens leading the charge for years. We have told teen girls they were empowered. What, you thought it was fiction? It was preparation.

Ansbach’s statement struck a chord on social media, with over 70,000 retweets. Indeed, students and teachers across the US are already engaging in rich critical analysis at a pivotal point in U.S. history.

This work must continue alongside further pedagogies, policies, and methodologies that augment the textual critiques in which students already engage.

Critical literacies have spread through educational policy and pedagogy, productively encouraging readers to question established systems of knowledge. However, approaches grounded in cosmetic criticality have done little to clarify or disrupt the dynamics of oppression upheld by post-truth. Instead, such skepticism for its own sake does more to advance post-truth than to form a coherent way to address it. While there is much to gain from the first wave responses that have emerged as a response to post-truth, the first wave methods must be augmented by second wave methodologies to render post-truth fully legible.

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**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Rethinking Education Policy and Methodology in a Post-truth Era**

education policy analysis archives

Volume 26 Number 147

November 19, 2018

ISSN 1068-2341



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