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## A PANDEMIC OF IGNORANCE: MANUFACTURED IGNORANCE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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What is ignorance? One response is that ignorance is the absence of knowledge. But given that what constitutes knowledge is complex, what is *not* knowledge is arguably even more complex. When questions are asked about knowledge, we assert, questions should also be asked about ignorance. Nancy Tuana concurs. She writes that “we must also understand the practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, for our *lack* of knowledge about a phenomenon or, in some cases, an account of the practices that results in a group *unlearning* what was once a reality of knowledge. In other words, those who would strive to understand how we know, must also develop epistemologies of ignorance.”<sup>1</sup> While the study of ignorance is nothing new to philosophy—Socrates tells us that our lives are not worth living unless we are seeking knowledge; and his wisdom resides in his knowing that whatever he does not know, he does not suppose he knows—we explore the origin and production of ignorance in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. We do not suppose that we know all there is to know about the virus, but, in modernized Socratic fashion, we should be wiser for inquiring into whether the biological pandemic is also a pandemic of ignorance. Ultimately, we link the question of a pandemic of ignorance to state education laws and policies that arguably manufacture ignorance.

Socrates aside, there are significant gaps in the study of ignorance, and these gaps have only recently begun to be filled. The main gaps are (a) defining the constitutive features of ignorance; (b) examining the strategic implications of ignorance; and (c) the potential of ignorance as an instrument for epistemic inquiry in education policy. We address these gaps to explore and understand the implications of ignorance as it is manufactured. To do so, we rely on Robert Proctor’s outline of ignorance. For agnotology (the study of manufactured ignorance), Proctor offers three categories for the origin of ignorance: (1) ignorance as a native state; (2) ignorance as a lost realm; and (3) ignorance as constructed, i.e., a strategic ploy.<sup>2</sup> These categories are not exhaustive, but they provide an outline to understand the nuances of ignorance and help us to answer the question, “What is ignorance?”

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Tuana, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 108-145, 108.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 1-33, 3.

As we detail below, ignorance as a native state means that it is unavoidable; it is inherent to human being. Ignorance is produced by mere existence, and it is induced from experience. Ignorance as a lost realm is when there is an active decision: a selective choice to not know. Such ignorance is commonly understood as willful ignorance in which knowledge is strategically disregarded, refused, or avoided. Ignorance as a strategic ploy also involves deliberate choices, but it implies that there is an ongoing effort to construct ignorance and obstruct knowledge for political gain. As Proctor explains, ignorance as a strategic ploy is “one that easily lends itself to paranoia: namely, that certain people don’t want you to know certain things or will actively work to organize doubt or uncertainty or misinformation to help maintain your ignorance.”<sup>3</sup> Our purpose is not to create a sense of paranoia or lead to conspiracy theories regarding the intentions of any one person or institution. We use Proctor’s categories, however, to argue that ignorance was manufactured by the Donald J. Trump administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of intent. We identify the strategies, specifically the discourse, that was used by the Trump administration. After understanding potential tools of manufactured ignorance, we extend our point to argue there are illustrative cases of state education laws and policies that also manufacture ignorance.

Our exploration relies on news articles (including international sources), information sanctioned by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO), archived press releases and statements from the White House, as well as “tweets” collected from former President Donald J. Trump’s now suspended Twitter account. We explore whether the information from the CDC/WHO and the information from the Trump administration were consistent or divergent. If the information was consistent, what elements overlapped and converged? If the information was divergent, what elements deviated? Specifically, is there any evidence that ignorance was manufactured by the Trump administration during the pandemic? We begin with a more detailed explication of Proctor’s three categories of ignorance. We then provide evidence of convergence and divergence among and between the CDC/WHO and White House. We end by arguing that the biological pandemic was—and is—an agnotological pandemic, too, and that recent state education law and policy initiatives indicate the virality of manufacturing ignorance in schools.

#### IGNORANCE AS A NATIVE STATE

One of the origins of ignorance is as a native state of being: we are born with it. Evolutionarily, native ignorance is a space for potential knowledge. Stuart Firestein argues that ignorance is what fuels inquiry, and students must learn to embrace their ignorance. He claims that native ignorance is what “turns your crank, the very driving force of science, the exhilaration of the unknown.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Proctor, “Agnotology,” 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How it Drives Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

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On this view, knowledge relies on ignorance. There is, however, a discomfort that comes with accepting ignorance as something native to our existence. In a society where the “more dogmatic aspects of society or culture place more weight on getting the product right...orthodoxy and heresy” are ever-present risks.<sup>5</sup> Accepting native ignorance means accepting that knowledge is unfinished, uncertain, and infinite.

When considering the development of knowledge during the pandemic, especially at the outset, there was confusion and fear of what we did not know. We were collectively experiencing unavoidable and unpredictable native ignorance.<sup>6</sup> The virus was first reported to be detected in Wuhan, China on December 12, 2019, and it was identified as a novel virus on December 31, 2019, when doctors confirmed the virus was unlike any other coronavirus they had encountered. On January 6, 2020, *The South China Morning Post* published an article stating that “health experts warned the public on Monday not to drop their guard over the unidentified outbreak of viral pneumonia in central China,” and no human-to-human transmission had yet been detected.<sup>7</sup>

On January 8, 2020, a report in *The New York Times* claimed that there was a new virus in China.<sup>8</sup> January 9, 2020 was the date of the first confirmed human death. In the days that followed, the virus went from being a marginal story to, essentially, the only story. The virus was new, it was spreading in an unpredictable manner, and ignorance worldwide was native and unavoidable. Keller and Keller state that “we might uncover in ourselves a species of willful ignorance as well as a failure to love our appropriate ignorance of the unknown and unknowable, and we might see that these aspects of epistemologies of ignorance have been cultivated by both social norms and by our own fears of the unknown.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the problems that stem from a fear of uncertainty are noted in the next section, where we also clarify how selectively sharing information produces ignorance.

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory J. Keller and Deborah Biss Keller, “Socrates, Dialogue, and Us,” in *Epistemologies of Ignorance in Education*, eds. Erik Malewski and Nathalia Jaramillo (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011), 87-104, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Devjani Roy and Richard Zeckhauser, “The Anatomy of Ignorance: Diagnosis from Literature,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey (New York: Routledge, 2015), 61-73, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Kinling Lo, “Public Warned Not to Drop Guard Over Mystery China Virus After Tests Rule Out Sars or Bird Flu,” *South China Morning Post*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3044909/public-warned-not-drop-their-guard-over-mystery-china-virus>.

<sup>8</sup> Sui-Lee Wee and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “China Identifies New Virus Causing Pneumonialike Illness,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/health/china-pneumonia-outbreak-virus.html?searchResultPosition=157>.

<sup>9</sup> Keller and Keller, “Socrates, Dialogue, and Us,” 90-91.

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### IGNORANCE AS A LOST REALM

January 21, 2020 was the day the first case of COVID-19 in the United States was publicly diagnosed and when it was confirmed that the virus could be transmitted from person to person. According to the CDC, transmission was confirmed because the patient who became ill had no history of travel to Wuhan but had shared a residence with a previously diagnosed patient who had traveled to Wuhan.<sup>10</sup> Following these disclosures, social media sites were increasingly used to share information about the coronavirus. The information that was shared, however, was not always accurate and was not always from reputable sources.<sup>11</sup> Shared misinformation on social media is an example of ignorance as a lost realm, which implies there is an active and selective choice, by an individual, to not know something.

Medical information, especially related to epidemics and pandemics, is particularly vulnerable to misinformation. Given the human proclivity for stability and comfort, one of the challenges of the virus outbreak was finding reliable and accurate information to keep people safe. While it may be logical to seek such reliable and accurate information, “absolute certainty in the realm of medicine and public health is rare [and] our public health programs will not be effective if absolute proof is required before we act; the best available evidence must be sufficient.”<sup>12</sup> In the absence of clear and convincing evidence, ignorance as a lost realm features prominently. In the case of the virus and increased social media posts involving misinformation, there is evidence that people decided that they would rather not confront the new knowledge about virus risks and would, instead, ignore the information they determined was too threatening to their way of life. For this paper, we document how former president Donald J. Trump reified ignorance as a lost realm as a ploy to his utilization of ignorance as a strategic ploy. Specifically, we use Trump’s Twitter data to compare with

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<sup>10</sup> Center for Disease Control, “First Travel-related Case of 2019 Novel Coronavirus Detected in United States,” *CDC Newsroom Press Release*, January 21, 2020, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0121-novel-coronavirus-travel-case.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Matteo Cinelli, Walter Quattrociochi, Alessandro Galeazzi, Carlo Michele Valensise, Emanuele Brugnoli, Ana Lucia Schmidt, Paola Zola, Fabiana Zollo, and Antonio Scala, “The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic,” *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 16598 (2020): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>.

<sup>12</sup> David Michaels, “Manufactured Uncertainty: Contested Science and the Protection of the Public’s Health and Environment,” in *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008), 90-107, 91. See, also, Philip Walker, “The Library’s Role in Countering Infodemics,” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 109, no. 1 (January 2021): 133-136, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jmls.2021.1044>. We think the US public generally holds a mistaken expectation of science. As John Dewey wrote in *Quest for Certainty*, the inductive nature of science does not mean perfect answers to questions, but fallibilist inquiry for the continual search for knowledge (qua knowing).

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medical health information from the CDC and WHO.<sup>13</sup> The agnotological implications of this comparison help clarify how ignorance functions.

The first tweet in which Trump mentions the virus was on January 27, 2020. He links the virus to China, stating that he has offered his help to Chinese President Xi, and that there are “very few cases reported in the USA, but strongly on watch.”<sup>14</sup> His tweet received 21,000 retweets and 114,000 likes.<sup>15</sup> On the same day as Trump’s tweet, WHO tweeted a question-and-answer thread that received 4,560 retweets and 4,817 likes.<sup>16</sup>

Trump also repeatedly called the coronavirus the “China Virus.” On January 3, 2021, he specifically targeted the CDC: “The number of cases and deaths of the China Virus is far exaggerated in the United States because of @CDCgov’s ridiculous method of determination compared to other countries, many of whom report, purposely, very inaccurately and low. ‘When in doubt,

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<sup>13</sup> We acknowledge that there are multiple and competing social media sites involved with the spread of misinformation. Cinelli, et al., argue that each social media platform has its “own peculiarities and depends on the group dynamics of individuals engaged with the topic” (*op. cit.*, p. 5). For more on the current research into the spread of misinformation and false news on social media platforms, see Aengus Bridgman, Eric Merkley, Oleg Zhilin, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, and Derek Ruths, “Infodemic Pathways: Evaluating the Role That Traditional and Social Media Play in Cross-National Information Transfer, *Frontiers in Political Science* 3, no. 648646 (March 2021): 1-11. See, also, Arunima Krishna and Teresa L. Thompson, “Misinformation About Health: A Review of Health Communication and Misinformation Scholarship,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 2 (2021): 316-332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878223>.

<sup>14</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “We are in very close communication with China concerning the virus. Very few cases reported in USA, but strongly on watch. We have offered China and President Xi any help that is necessary,” Twitter, January 27, 2020, 9:56 am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>. Donald J. Trump’s Twitter account @realDonaldTrump was permanently suspended on January 8, 2021, following the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol insurrection. The data we cite on number of retweets and likes is preserved, as of January 8, 2021, on the Trump Twitter Archive V2 at <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>15</sup> The number of comments is not available on the Trump Twitter Archive, however, and, even though the original Tweet has been deleted from the Twitter platform, the comments are still visible. For those who are not adept at how Twitter works, any interaction with the Tweet, whether it is a like, comment, or retweet, will amplify the content to anyone following the user who interacted. This means even people who comment to fact check or disavow the content are still amplifying the Tweet to their followers. This is cause for concern because even those who are trying to be vigilantes are contributing to the manufacturing of ignorance.

<sup>16</sup> Because the @WHO Twitter account has not been suspended, and Tweets can still have interaction, these numbers are subject to change. These numbers were obtained on September 13, 2021, at 5:40pm EST.

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call it Covid.’ Fake News!’”<sup>17</sup> This tweet received 53,000 retweets and 210,000 likes. A tweet from @CDCgov with Covid-19 facts received 241 retweets and 429 likes.<sup>18</sup> The comparative differences in the number of retweets and likes suggests that ignorance as a lost realm has salience. Different from “echo chambers” or forms of confirmation bias, ignorance as a lost realm is characterized by *not* knowing. There is a selective choice—a conscious decision—to disregard knowing and replace it with not knowing.

Within ignorance as a lost realm, Trump extended the narrative definition to include obfuscation. He claimed that “The lockdowns in Democrat run states are absolutely ruining the lives of so many people – Far more than the damage that would be caused by the China Virus. Cases in California have risen despite the lockdown, yet Florida & others are open and doing well. Common sense please!”<sup>19</sup> This tweet was shared 83,000 times and liked by 359,000 users. The tweet conflates the ruination of human life with the ruination of human livelihoods and suggests that one political party knows better than another political party. Florida was not, in fact, “doing well,” as it added 10,607 new cases on December 24, 2020, compared to Michigan, a “Democrat run state,” that added 1,932 new cases on the same day.<sup>20</sup>

Each of these tweets illustrates at least two points: (1) ignorance as content; and (2) the rapid spread of misinformation. Twitter users willingly amplified Trump’s content on social media rather than reputable sources of data. In terms of ignorance as a lost realm, Twitter users demonstrated an active decision, a selective choice, to not know expert medical information. We argue that it is feasible to explain this phenomenon by using Proctor’s third category for agnotology.

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<sup>17</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The number of cases and deaths of the China Virus is far exaggerated in the United States because of @CDCgov’s ridiculous method of determination compared to other countries ...” Twitter, January 3, 2020, 8:14 am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>18</sup> @CDCgov Twitter account is currently still active. This point is important because the Tweet can still have interactions, such that the numbers we cite have already changed. We obtained our data on September 3, 2021, at 6:02pm EST.

<sup>19</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The lockdowns in Democrat run states are absolutely ruining the lives of so many people – Far more than the damage that would be caused by the China Virus ...” Twitter, December 26, 2020, 2:02 pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>20</sup> As reported by CDC COVID Data Tracker [https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends\\_dailytrendscases](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_dailytrendscases). Even when considering the population difference, the seven-day case rate per 100,000 in Florida was 349 compared to Michigan’s 177. Clearly, a snapshot of the data is not generalizable. We use the example only to illustrate the utilization of ignorance for political gain—and this gain is not limited to one political party.

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### IGNORANCE AS A STRATEGIC PLOY

Ignorance that is produced as a strategic ploy is characterized by the bias or political agenda that is enforced by the manipulated information. Ignorance in this sense is not to be understood as a one-time, unwitting occurrence, but rather as an active part of a deliberate plan.

Donald Trump's agenda throughout the beginning of the pandemic (January-March 2020) was to identify the virus as a problem of, and one that was being handled by, China. His stratagem was to defer to Xi Jinping and re-state that the situation was being "handled well." Additionally, Trump was selective about the information he included about the virus. We suggest that his selectivity indicates a strategic ploy and one where he intentionally advanced ignorance. Consider three examples:

- January 22, 2020: Trump answered a question about having a plan to contain the coronavirus in the U.S., stating "We do have a plan, and we think it's going to be handled very well. We've already handled it very well. CDC has been terrific. Very great professionals. And we're in very good shape. And we think China is in very good shape also."<sup>21</sup>
- January 24, 2020: Trump tweeted, "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"<sup>22</sup>
- January 29, 2020: Trump tweeted, "Just received a briefing on the Coronavirus in China from all of our GREAT agencies, who are also working closely with China."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Donald J. Trump, transcript of "Remarks by President Trump and President Barzani of Kurdistan Regional Government Before Bilateral Meeting," January 22, 2020, 10:50am CET, Davos, Switzerland, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-barzani-kurdistan-regional-government-bilateral-meeting-davos-switzerland/>.

<sup>22</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well ..." Twitter, January 24, 2020, 4:18pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>23</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) "Just received a briefing on the Coronavirus in China from all our GREAT agencies, who are also working closely with China. We will continue to monitor the ongoing developments ..." Twitter, January 29, 2020, 7:06pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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Given that the first confirmed case in the United States was on January 21, 2020, why, a week later, was Trump projecting the problem onto China? Was he demonstrating native ignorance? Was he signifying ignorance as a lost realm? Was he choosing to ignore medical information and transmit misleading information to the public? On January 31, 2020, WHO declared a global health emergency, but the information provided to the public by the White House continued to diverge from WHO declarations. Consider the following:

February 7, 2020, before a Marine One departure, Trump paused to speak to the press on the Front Lawn.

Q: Mr. President, a question about China.

The President: Yeah.

Q. Are you concerned that China is covering up the full extent of the coronavirus?

The President: No. China is working very hard. Late last night, I had a very good talk with President Xi, and we talked about – mostly about the coronavirus. They’re working really hard, and I think they are doing a very professional job. They’re in touch with the World -the World-World Organization. CDC also. We’re working together. But World Health is working with them. CDC is working with them. I had a great conversation last night with President Xi. It’s a tough situation. I think they’re doing a very good job.

Q: Are you concerned about its potential impact on the global economy?

The President: We think that China will do a very good job.<sup>24</sup>

We note that in these remarks Trump indicated that China was addressing the problem and that the rest of the world need not be concerned about global impact. Meanwhile, on February 2, 2020, global air travel had been restricted, and, on February 3, 2020, the Trump administration declared a public health emergency. On February 25, 2020, the CDC tweeted that US businesses should begin to prepare for community spread. Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, stated that “Ultimately, we expect we will see community spread in this country. It’s not so much a question of if this will happen anymore, but rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in the country will have

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<sup>24</sup> Donald J. Trump, transcript of “Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure,” February 7, 2020, 11:16am EST, South Lawn, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-011221/>.

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severe illness.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the Trump administration was consistent with their message that everything was okay and that there was no reason to worry. On February 28, 2020, during a reception for African American History Month at the White House, Trump called on Alex Azar, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, to make public remarks on the coronavirus.

President Trump: Alex Azar- and he’s working very hard on a thing called the virus. How’s it going? Do you have anything to report to us, Alex?

Secretary Azar: So, we just want to report to everybody that, thanks to the President’s historically aggressive containment efforts, we have really been able to keep the risk to Americans low right now, so that everyday Americans don’t need to be worried. But that can change and that’s why it’s important for all of us to prepare.<sup>26</sup>

On the same day as the reception, Trump tweeted that the number of virus cases in China was decreasing as 81,000 cases were reported globally, with 96 percent of those cases confirmed in China.<sup>27</sup> The consistent message from the White House was not to worry, the virus was contained, and that the imminent risk to the United States was low regardless of the CDC’s and Messonnier’s warning two days earlier.

At issue is a point noted in a March 7, 2020 *New York Times* article that explored whether the Trump administration was deliberately misleading the public: “From the beginning, the Trump administration’s attempts to forestall an outbreak of a virus now spreading rapidly across the globe was marked by a raging internal debate about how far to go in telling Americans the truth. Even as the government’s scientists and leading health experts raised the alarm early

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<sup>25</sup> Center for Disease Control, “Transcript for the CDC Telebriefing Update on COVID-19,” with Benjamin Haynes and Nancy Messonnier, *CDC Newsroom Press Briefing*, February 25, 2020, released on February 26, 2020, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0225-cdc-telebriefing-covid-19.html>. We think it is important to note, too, that the CDC was not without problems. From questions of timing to consistency to accuracy, there are justifiable questions to raise about how the agency functioned. Indeed, the CDC might be an excellent case study for the tensions between scientific, and thus fallibilist knowledge, and the politics of public health institutions. For our purposes, however, the evidence of intentional.

<sup>26</sup> Donald J. Trump and Alex Azar, transcript of “Remarks by President Trump at a Reception for African American History Month,” February 27, 2020, 6:57pm EST, issued on February 28, 2020, East Room, Trump White House Archives, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-reception-african-american-history-month/>.

<sup>27</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “Congratulations and thank you to our great Vice President & all of the many professionals doing such a fine job at CDC & other agencies on the Coronavirus situation ...” Twitter, February 27, 2020, 9:39pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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and pushed for aggressive action, they faced resistance and doubt at the White House – especially from the president – about spooking financial markets and inciting panic.”<sup>28</sup> Was there a strategic agenda by the White House to manipulate and censor the information they were providing to the public? Consider this series of tweets from Trump in 2020:

- February 27, 2020: Anti-Trump Network @CNN doing whatever it can to stoke a national Coronavirus panic. The far left Network pretty much ignoring anyone who they interview who doesn’t blame President Trump.<sup>29</sup>
- March 9, 2020: The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant. Surgeon General, “The risk is low to the average American.”<sup>30</sup>
- March 9, 2020: So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!<sup>31</sup>
- March 18, 2021: I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China – against the

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<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Shear, Sheri Fink, and Noah Weiland, “Inside Trump Administration, Debate Raged Over What to Tell Public, *The New York Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/politics/trump-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “Anti-Trump Network @CNN doing whatever it can to stoke a national Coronavirus panic. The far left Network pretty much ignoring anyone who they interview who doesn’t blame President Trump,” Twitter, February 27, 2020, 8:53pm EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation ...” Twitter, March 9, 2020, 7:20am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>31</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases,” Twitter, March 9, 2020, 10:47am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

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wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!<sup>32</sup>

It appears that Trump used his Twitter account to attack the media and Democrats in a strategic attempt to downplay the virus. Sowing doubt or downplaying something as serious as a pandemic is a calculated tactic to obscure uncomfortable truths. His claims, and the amplification of his claims by his supporters, suggests the manufacturing of ignorance as a strategic ploy.<sup>33</sup>

While presidential politics about the COVID-19 pandemic may seem distant from state and local education policy, we argue that manufacturing ignorance as a strategic ploy is a logical extension from the White House to state houses. Our claims above demonstrate certain tools of manufactured ignorance, such as creating diversions, deception, and doubt. We pivot, therefore, to show how manufacturing ignorance as a strategic ploy is evidenced in recent state education policy initiatives. While much more could be said about this shift, we recognize the limits of space in publishing and turn directly to illustrative cases of policy initiatives representing manufacturing ignorance. This investigation is only the beginning of a larger inquiry into the implications and practices of manufactured ignorance in schools and educational laws and policies. Our general point is that if schools were places for epistemic inquiry, ignorance would be mitigated. Unfortunately, schools are being forced into roles that reify ignorance rather than challenging it.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC OF IGNORANCE IN EDUCATION POLICY

In this section, we will approach the issue of manufactured ignorance and education policy from two perspectives: (1) the potential influence of manufactured ignorance on the formation of state and local education policies, such as mask mandates in schools; and (2) education policies that have the potential to create ignorance through their implementation in schools. We begin by looking at how some schools followed evidence about using masks to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and how some states employed tactics of manufactured ignorance to doubt the evidence and ban mask mandates. This is followed by a

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<sup>32</sup> Donald J. Trump, (@realDonaldTrump) “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China ...” Twitter, March 18, 2020, 7:46am EST, Trump Twitter Archive V2, last modified January 8, 2021, <http://www.thetrumparchive.com>.

<sup>33</sup> See, also, Christian Paz, “All the President’s Lies About the Coronavirus,” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>; and Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

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look at recent education policies, such as bills that ban books, which upon implementation could potentially manufacture ignorance.<sup>34</sup>

According to EdWeek, as of March 29, 2022, five states have effectively passed laws that prevent school districts from implementing universal mask mandates. However, there were still 18 states that had universal mask mandates before the CDC guidelines changed in February of 2022.<sup>35</sup> Despite scientific evidence that advised the public to wear masks in crowded spaces, doubting science was evident in the first three months of the pandemic, which coincides with our previous timeline.<sup>36</sup> According to Tatiana Batova, who analyzed responses to CDC tweets about mask-wearing between January and April, there were several themes in which the general public indicated growing distrust and even anger towards the CDC recommendations.<sup>37</sup> The CDC initially did not recommend the average American should wear a mask. Granting native ignorance and epistemic fallibility, scientific knowledge is subject to change. This change is not random, however; it follows from scientific investigation and the rigors of scientific method. While scientific knowledge developed into the scientific community's acceptance that mask-wearing was an effective measure to lower risk of a COVID-19 infection, public doubt persisted. The doubt around the science of mask wearing encouraged policy disputes regarding mandates. There were instances in which parents stood outside schools and school board meetings protesting masks.<sup>38</sup> These protests eventually led some states, like Florida, to ban universal mask mandates. On July 30, 2021, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order that banned schools from implementing a universal mandate for mask-wearing and threatened consequences for any

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<sup>34</sup> We recognize that the nature of our information for this analysis is time-stamped and therefore subject to change as policies inevitably update.

<sup>35</sup> Stacey Decker, "Which States Ban Mask Mandates in Schools, and Which Require Masks?" *Education Week*, August 20, 2021, last modified April 19, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/which-states-ban-mask-mandates-in-schools-and-which-require-masks/2021/08>.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the science of the effectiveness of mask wearing see: Yuxin Wang, Zicheng Deng, and Donglu Shi, "How Effective is a Mask in Preventing COVID-19 Infection?" *Medical Devices and Sensors*, e10163. Published ahead of print, January 5, 2021, <http://doi.org/10.1002/mds3.10163>.

<sup>37</sup> Tatiana Batova, "To Wear or Not to Wear: A Commentary on Mistrust in Public Comments to CDC Tweets about Mask-Wearing during COVID-19," *International Journal of Business Communication* 59, no. 2 (2022): 287-308, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884211008584>.

<sup>38</sup> See the following examples from St. Johns County: <https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2021/08/10/st-johns-county-parents-protest-call-for-mask-mandate-for-students-teachers/> and Manatee County: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/18/florida-parents-anger-schools-lack-mask-mandates>.

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district that violated the order.<sup>39</sup> The news release issued by Taryn Fenske, Director of Communications for DeSantis, stated: “Today, Governor Ron DeSantis issued Executive Order 21-175, in response to several Florida school boards considering or implementing mask mandates in their schools after the Biden Administration issued unscientific and inconsistent recommendations that school-aged children wear masks.”<sup>40</sup> The memo indicates that the order to ban mask mandates in schools was to counter President Joe Biden’s administration, which are taken directly from the CDC. After the executive order, some school districts chose to continue having mask mandates in place. State lawmakers have since made efforts to pull funding from those school districts that defied the executive order.<sup>41</sup> The manufactured ignorance about the nature of the pandemic and the effectiveness of mask wearing had a direct impact on state level education policies.

In the last couple of years there has been an increase in the number of policy proposals, nationwide, that are designed to control knowledge and censor educators in public schools. Policies range from restricting conversations about LGBTQIA issues, to banning books, to limiting topics related to racism and slavery. In October of 2021, Texas State Representative Matt Krause launched an “investigation” into 850 book titles. In his letter sent to Lily Laux, the deputy commissioner of school programs with the Texas Education Agency, Krause indicates he is initiating the investigation for the protection and welfare of Texas citizens.<sup>42</sup> The letter was also blind copied to an undisclosed number of superintendents from unidentified school districts.<sup>43</sup> The letter was not a binding contract or law, nor was there any potential consequence for not complying. Regardless, a number of districts around Texas began reviewing books and pulling them from their shelves. The Granbury Independent School District (GISD) selected 131 books to be reviewed by a committee to determine whether or not the books contained *inappropriate* content. Not long after the books were

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<sup>39</sup> Rich McKay, “Florida Governor Blocks School Mask Mandates, Says Parents Can Choose,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/florida-gov-desantis-issue-order-giving-parents-choice-mask-children-school-2021-07-30/>.

<sup>40</sup> Taryn Fenske, “Governor DeSantis Issues an Executive Order Ensuring Parents’ Freedom to Choose,” news release, July 30, 2021, <https://www.flgov.com/2021/07/30/governor-desantis-issues-an-executive-order-ensuring-parents-freedom-to-choose/>.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Mervosh, “Florida Withholds Money from School Districts Over Mask Mandates,” *The New York Times*, last modified September 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/30/us/florida-schools-mask-mandates.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Matt Krause email to Texas Education Agency, Attn: Lily Laux, October 25, 2021, <https://static.texastribune.org/media/files/965725d7f01b8a25ca44b6fde2f5519b/krauseletter.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Lopez, “Texas House Committee to Investigate School Districts’ Books on Race and Sexuality,” *The Texas Tribune*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/10/26/texas-school-books-race-sexuality/>.

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removed, 103 have been returned to the shelves.<sup>44</sup> GISD is not a unique school district, however, and we are seeing similar reactions to specific books in other states.

In January 2022, a Tennessee school board voted to remove the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* from their eighth-grade curriculum. Lee Parkison, director of schools for McMinn County stated that “there is some rough, objectionable language in this book.” In a statement released by the McMinn County school board, they claim that the book was removed because “of its unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide,” adding that the content was “too adult-oriented” and that the book does not reflect the values of the community it serves.<sup>45</sup>

These are just two examples of banning books, and neither were triggered by a state or federal policy. However, in Texas, Governor Greg Abbott has been vocal about his support for the “Parental Bill of Rights,” which would give parents the power to report materials they consider inappropriate—and seek repercussions for any educators who provide access to those materials. And, in the state of Georgia, the state where both authors of this paper reside, SB226 signed by Governor Kemp on April 28, 2022 requires school districts to adopt a complaint resolution process for parents and guardians to report classroom materials that are considered to be “harmful to minors.”<sup>46</sup> This bill is separate from two other bills signed by Kemp on the same day: (1) the divisive concepts bill, HB1084, which will place restrictions on diversity trainings and classroom topics that are considered to be divisive; and (2) the parents’ bill of rights, HB1178, which gives parents the authority to file complaints and obtain waivers for the purpose of directing the education of their own children.<sup>47</sup>

For ignorance to be manufactured there needs to be a human-made force, in which a person or institution takes deliberate action, to control knowledge. Having control over the dissemination of knowledge vests power with those who determine what knowledge is to be known or what knowledge is not to be known. In schools, the long-standing debates about what is included in curriculum (and what is left out) are centrally about controlling information

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<sup>44</sup> Reese Oxner, “ACLU Wants North Texas School to Apologize for Removing Over 100 Library Books,” *The Texas Tribune*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/28/granbury-isd-aclu-book-removal/>.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Gross, “School Board in Tennessee Bans Teaching of Holocaust Novel ‘Maus,’” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/maus-banned-holocaust-tennessee.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Sale or Distribution of Harmful Materials to Minors, S.B.226, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022).

<sup>47</sup> Parents’ Bill of Rights, H.B.1178, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022); and Education; Prevent Use of Curricula or Training Programs Which Encourage Certain Concepts, H.B. 1084, 156<sup>th</sup> Georgia General Assembly, Session 2 (2022).

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transfer.<sup>48</sup> Because of the way state standards are designed and how standardized tests influence school goals, classroom teachers have little say in what knowledge they teach. Most educators are contractually obligated to follow the prescribed curriculum to prepare their students for tests. Policies that mandate standards and tests, and/or dictate what knowledge is valued (and which knowledge is omitted), are therefore foundational to manufacturing ignorance.

An obvious implication is the role that schools play in producing, conveying, and critiquing knowledge. Scientific investigation in schools should not be limited to biology or chemistry classes, in other words. As an epistemic project, considering ignorance as part of US schooling might yield a more critical understanding of the role of inquiry—broadly conceived—as part of an expanded fallibilist epistemology for students and teachers.

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<sup>48</sup> See Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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