



Information is Treachery

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Twenty-five years ago, when I was a University student, I believed that facts existed and that the truth about any given topic could be found at the end of a long, circuitous period of research in the archives of a good library. This belief, of course, was quixotic, but it instilled a value in me as a young academic that is essential for the constructive exchange of information between human beings: trust.

This trust was not completely blind. When I read a non-fiction essay, or a news article, I understood that its content reflected an author's limited point of view. But that limitation did not undermine my faith in a source's legitimacy. I accepted the idea that no author is omniscient, and tried to learn from the unique slice of truth that a writer offered up to me. I could be discerning and even exacting about the quality and depth of a writer's arguments, but did not worry about how or whether an author was trying to deceive me. I took the risk of traveling gullibly through a writer's version of reality without fear of losing sight of my own.

Today I find that I have become a suspicious and risk-averse reader. My discussions with peers, friends and family about non-fiction writing increasingly revolve around the 'agenda' of its author instead of around the quality of its construct and premise. When I see ideas presented as 'facts' in a news article, I wonder about how they have been doctored. I accept cynicism about truth as an unspoken tenet of public discourse, and refrain from pronouncing any idea too categorically for fear of appearing intolerant. I have become afraid to express myself with conviction about good writing when it contains politically sensitive content. I sense that I am no longer completely free to do so.

I was asked to write an article for this publication about the role that documentary theatre, my chosen literary genre, can play today in informing people. I find it necessary to start with the above preamble, because a discussion about the act of informing people cannot happen without addressing the times in which one is attempting to do so. And today we are living in treacherous times with regards to information sharing.

Right now I am compelled to tell you that I am a white, privileged, heterosexual woman. My plays receive public funding. My mother tongue is English. I lean slightly left of centre politically. I was born in Montreal - in Westmount to be more precise.

Twenty-five years ago, I would have never felt compelled to share this information with you, my reader. It would have been considered gratuitous and irrelevant in non-fiction writing, unless I was addressing some aspect of my identity explicitly. Today I am acutely aware that these aspects of my identity will be considered foundational to the tone and tenor of this

article and will be highlighted to construct a political message out of my words. I feel that I should offer them up willingly, to preempt this type of reaction. In the words of the American historian, Timothy Snyder, I have decided to 'obey in advance' to the tyranny of interpretation that now consumes the world of information sharing, and to accept the narrow corridor of analysis that my race, socio-economic status, sexual identity, and politics afford me. I can no longer be trusted to inform you legitimately about experiences beyond those borders.

Which doesn't mean that I'm not going to try. Resistance to tyranny, after all, is the order of the day.

My documentary plays seek to inform an audience by throwing the concepts of identity and authority to the wind. They are stories built by a writer who seeks pleasure in listening to other peoples' stories and passing along that pleasure and those stories to an audience. They are stories performed by actors who play characters who don't share their identities. They reflect my desire to examine universal truths in the theatre, as opposed to advancing a message about specific identity politics.

When I write a documentary play, I am transparent and unapologetic about my identity as a narrator. I remind an audience who I am so they can decide for themselves how and whether or not to trust my recounting of the story they are experiencing. I expose them to my biases and shortcomings as a witness to reality, so that they may become aware of their own. I do this because I think the most important precondition for absorbing information is to remove the stress about being able to do so perfectly. Informing oneself is a human activity, and therefore delightfully imperfect.

Despite the imperfect nature of my authority, I strive to be a rigorous and patient documentary narrator. I open myself up to diverse and conflicting points of view and allow myself to become disoriented in pursuit of clarity on a given subject. I share this disorientation with my audience so that they may forgive themselves for also becoming bewildered by the story I am telling them. Real life is complex and contradictory; when we share information about it, we will collectively be wiser if we accept and enjoy a degree of chaos. The biggest killjoy and enemy of good documentary narration is control.

And yet control is ever-present in information sharing today. Journalists censor themselves for fear of offending an over-sensitive readership. Politicians polish their speeches and press releases to avoid violent social media squalls. Today we read about overt efforts to influence democracy through misinformation campaigns. The only soil in which these actions could successfully take root is one in which the nutrient of trust has completely vanished from storytelling. This is the environment in which I am attempting, with great trepidation, to converse candidly with an audience today.

The theatre, luckily, is a medium that has always thrived in moments of information tyranny, because it communicates its essential meaning through subtext, not text. Subtext is available to a live audience, and to an open-minded reader, without being precisely apparent to cultural control agents who obsess about narrow, literal meaning. The best plays are ones that don't reveal their meaning explicitly, but which offer a diverse audience multiple levels

of meaning. They are plays that trust that an audience will be intelligent enough to reconcile various meanings without seeking to pin one message on its author.

Today, as a documentary playwright, I feel that my role in informing people is to remind them to trust their instincts and to forgive themselves for not being perfectly informed about the world. It is to entreat them to leave Facebook and Twitter for a few hours everyday and to make contact with a real person who has a real story to tell them about their actual experience in the world. That story will almost certainly contain truths that will be as legitimate as a statistic in a news article. The added bonus of the live encounter, however, is that it will engender some trust between two real people, and that trust – built one conversation at a time between friends, neighbours, work colleagues and eventually between politician and citizen - is the foundation upon which we will build the conditions to be truly well-informed.