

## **The Blurring of Art, Journalism, and Advocacy: Confronting 21st Century Propaganda in a World of Online Journalism**

RENEE HOBBS\*

### I.

If you see something wrong about the world around you and you want to make social change, rule number one is simple: get a megaphone and learn how to use it.

Today, an increasing number of people are experimenting with both traditional and new media forms. Journalists, artists, advocates, fans and ordinary citizens are using drama, performance, film and video, blogs, social media, radio, music, graphic design, public art, and much more. Mainstream, market-driven news organizations are investing deeply in new forms of online journalism and are using photojournalism, infographics, forums, features, discussion boards, and chats to reach new audiences. Finally, journalists are letting go of their nostalgia for a monopoly past and finding creative ways to develop new ways to inform and entertain readers in a highly competitive online environment.

In a world where current events, ideas and opinions are spread virally through news aggregators, Twitter, and Facebook, more and more people are recognizing that, to get noticed in an attention economy, you must use any means necessary.

Everyone, it seems, has become a propagandist. Of course, broadcast journalists have long teased the local news with unanswered questions, like “Are local restaurants poisoning the elderly? Find out at 10:00.” Online, journalists now write eye-popping and sometimes

---

\* The author is Professor and Founding Director of the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island.

misleading headlines in order to get more clicks.<sup>1</sup> Businesses now exploit user-generated data to segment, track and target customers, serving them highly personalized ads and other persuasive content.<sup>2</sup> In the political world, half-truths, misleading statements and out-and-out deceptive messages are the norm.<sup>3</sup> Although some may wince at the term, with its negative connotations, we understand that propaganda is central to life in the twenty-first century, especially when it is defined, in its classic sense, as biased information designed to shape public opinion and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Originally used to refer to the dissemination of religious ideas, propaganda is an essential feature of modern society, as demands for freedom of press, assembly and speech are paired with skillful use of mass persuasion in the “marketplace of ideas.” Although the term came to be perceived in a negative light, propaganda is simply effective communication: it simplifies complicated issues through the use of evocative symbols, whether in written, musical, visual or digital forms, in order to help channel complex human emotions and shape attitudes and behaviors.

At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., the State of Deception exhibit reveals the powerful ways in which propaganda was used to target audiences, define the enemy, indoctrinate youth, and rally the nation. At its worst, propaganda leads to genocide. And in its best and highest use, propaganda can help shift public opinion and behavior to help create a “more educated, healthier and progressive citizenry.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to the classical rhetorical techniques of activating the heart (pathos), head (logos) and spirit (ethos), new techniques are evolving. When it comes to gaining mind share in the constantly-shifting landscape of the Internet and social media, the intentional blurring of the genres of art,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jim Romenesko, “Stretching the Truth of a Headline to Get Clicks,” *JimRomenesko.com*, April 27, 2012, <http://jimromenesko.com/2012/04/27/stretching-the-truth-of-a-headline-to-get-clicks> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Turow, *The Daily You: How the New Advertising in Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2001), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (New York: Random House, 2007), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007), 7.

<sup>5</sup> “What is Propaganda?” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010, <http://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/resources> (accessed February 18, 2013).

journalism, and advocacy is a way to attract attention, tap into and activate the wellspring of personal engagement.

Propaganda is so common and so effective that, in many senses, it is displacing and replacing traditional journalism, with its longstanding and careful attention to fairness, accuracy and balance. Public relations practitioners now outnumber journalists three-to-one.<sup>6</sup> As one reporter put it, “As PR becomes ascendant, private and government interests become more able to generate, filter, distort, and dominate the public debate, and to do so without the public knowing it.”<sup>7</sup>

This phenomenon has led many commentators and critics to be preoccupied with defining the new social responsibilities of online journalism in a world where a climate of intensifying political polarization—typified by shouting, name-calling, and emotional bomb throwing—combines with a deepening sense of apathy, alienation and helplessness among the citizenry in regards to the practice of democratic self-governance.

Mainstream journalists and others may worry about the new social responsibilities of those who pick up the digital megaphone in their role as citizen-activist-artist-propagandist, even while they ignore the competencies of the audiences who make sense of and interpret these messages. In this paper, I examine some of the public discourse about two propagandists who used mass media and digital media to draw attention to their causes: Mike Daisey, whose monologue about the Foxconn plant in China where Apple products are produced was aired on National Public Radio (“NPR”),<sup>8</sup> and Jason Russell, whose Kony2012 video about genocide in central Africa became the most widely viewed viral video ever.<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 2012, these two media events burst onto the public scene to illustrate the powerful ways in which genre blurriness is used strategically to garner public attention and activate public opinion.

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism* (Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> John Sullivan, “PR Industry Fills Vacuum Left by Shrinking Newsrooms,” *ProPublica*, May 1, 2011, <http://www.propublica.org/article/pr-industry-fills-vacuum-left-by-shrinking-newsrooms> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Winship, “Can One Man Change Apple?,” *Salon*, February 4, 2012, [http://www.salon.com/2012/02/24/can\\_one\\_man\\_change\\_apple/jobs/](http://www.salon.com/2012/02/24/can_one_man_change_apple/jobs/) (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Anneke Van Woudenberg, “How To Catch Joseph Kony,” *Salon*, March 9, 2012, [http://www.salon.com/2012/03/09/how\\_to\\_catch\\_joseph\\_kony](http://www.salon.com/2012/03/09/how_to_catch_joseph_kony) (accessed February 18, 2013).

By examining the communicative appeal of these new, blurry forms of propaganda at the intersection of art, journalism, and advocacy, I consider the role of the reader, the listener, and the viewer in this new world of public relations, viral news, online journalism, and infotainment, as audiences select, react and respond to the many and various forms of twenty-first century propaganda in our always-on, constantly-connected, digital cultural environment. While the danger of the genre blurriness is certainly to be acknowledged, the two cases I examine in this paper reveal significant evidence that people are acquiring the new competencies they need to be effective interpreters, communicators and citizens in a world where those who make best use of the digital megaphone rule.

## II.

Mike Daisey's emotionally powerful monologue about the conditions of life in China for workers at the giant industrial plant where Apple products are manufactured generated a lot of controversy for NPR, *This American Life* and New York's Public Theater, where he launched his creative project. Many people who have seen Daisey's performance, "The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," comment on its unusual mix of humor and emotional depth that activates the conscience of the audience. One reviewer wrote, "What is undeniable is Daisey's huge energy and immaculate comic timing. He delivers his monologue sitting at a table under a spotlight, his only props some notes and a glass of water: it's an intense experience, often funny and sometimes very moving."<sup>10</sup> Daisey has emphasized that his show "is a theatrical piece whose goal is to create a human connection between "our gorgeous devices and the brutal circumstances from which they emerge."<sup>11</sup> His monologue, which he has been performing on stage since 2010, uses a combination of fact, memoir, and fiction to tell its story.

But after NPR rebroadcast the monologue, *Marketplace* reporter Rob Schmitz was suspicious. The journalist tracked down Daisey's interpreter in China who disputed some details of Daisey's story. For

---

<sup>10</sup> Griselda Murray Brown, "Stranger Than Fact," *Financial Times*, May 12, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/5c12b46c-99bc-11e1-aa6d-00144feabdco.html#axzz1wDa7UgmJ> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Schulman, "Daisey Chain," *New Yorker*, March 17, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/03/daisey-chain.html> (accessed February 18, 2013).

example, Daisey remembers that, outside the Foxconn plant, there were guards with guns. But the interpreter disputes this. Daisey remembers talking with a young worker only fifteen-years old, but the interpreter maintains all subjects were over eighteen. When NPR's *This American Life* host and producer Ira Glass discovered inaccuracies and fabrications in the work, he issued a powerful retraction as a special episode of his radio show.<sup>12</sup> Mike Daisey's overall story about the harsh working conditions under which Apple products are produced in China was true, but he used exaggeration and suspense, manipulating facts strategically as a means to convey authenticity.

Many journalists had a field day with Mike Daisey, equating him with Rush Limbaugh and FOX News. Some portrayed him as an inept propagandist, telling fantastic and highly distorted tales that map onto people's existing worldviews about the human cost of high-tech capitalism. In particular, the *New York Times* exercised its thought leadership on this issue with a solidly heavy hand. For example, David Carr made a flat assertion: it's never okay to lie in pursuit of the truth.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Charles Isherwood claimed that "nonfiction should mean just that: facts and nothing but the facts," arguing that "theater that aims to shape public opinion by exposing the world's inequities has no less an obligation than journalism to construct its larger truths only from an accumulation of smaller ones."<sup>14</sup>

Some journalists offered a more nuanced perspective. For example, Rachel Manteuffel of the *Washington Post* acknowledged her own identity as a journalist-storyteller. In her opinion piece, she revealed her strategic use of rhetorical devices in shaping readers' interpretation of Daisey's personality and character.<sup>15</sup> For example, when she described his tendency to spit a little bit during a monologue performance, she used detail selectively to promote a specific

---

<sup>12</sup> National Public Radio, "This American Life," March 16, 2012, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/460/retraction> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> David Carr, "Theater, Disguised As Real Journalism," *New York Times*, March 18, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/business/media/theater-disguised-up-as-real-journalism.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/business/media/theater-disguised-up-as-real-journalism.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Isherwood, "Speaking Less Than Truth to Power," *New York Times*, March 18, 2012, <http://theater.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/theater/defending-this-american-life-and-its-mike-daisey-retraction.html> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Manteuffel, "Mike Daisey and the price of deceit," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-23/opinions/35448528\\_1\\_mike-daisey-onstage-episode](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-23/opinions/35448528_1_mike-daisey-onstage-episode) (accessed March 29, 2013).

emotional response from the reader. She comforted readers by noting that the information she chose to emphasize—selective and emotionally loaded as it is—is accurate. When it came to Mike Daisey, it seems, journalists took every opportunity to remind readers of their monopoly on truth. No doubt about it: Artists and journalists and activists and propagandists are different kinds of truth-tellers and storytellers and always have been.

### III.

When one of my students emailed me a link to the Kony2012 video in March of 2012, I recognized it as a perfect teachable moment to explore the power of genre blurriness as propaganda. The video introduces viewers to Jason Russell, a young filmmaker and activist whose visit to central Africa had inspired his interest in a young man whose family was brutalized by Joseph Kony, the military leader who for twenty-six years led the Lord's Resistance Army in the jungle in and around Uganda. According to the United Nations, Kony abducted, mutilated and killed tens of thousands of children and adults in the mid-2000s. The video and website created by Russell's group, Invisible Children, urged visitors to send donations and buy T-shirts, bracelets and posters. In fact, it was fans, hip-hop celebrities and millions of college students who helped the Kony2012 video to go viral, reaching over one hundred million page views in only six days.<sup>16</sup>

Within days of its release, journalists and some African human rights advocates critiqued the thirty-minute video for its outdated and Eurocentric perspective on the role of Joseph Kony in the complex interplay of Central African genocidal politics.<sup>17</sup> Journalists dismissed and trivialized the video for its outdated facts, reflecting a fundamental belief that truth is solely based in facts and information.

But in fact, the video's appeal and authenticity was in how it depicted a different sense of truth: one that comes from the heart. Reflecting the natural idealism of youth, the video represented the complex emotional drives of a young filmmaker who wished to help

---

<sup>16</sup> "How 'Kony2012' Went Viral," *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/12/kony-2012-viral-infographic\\_n\\_1421812.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/12/kony-2012-viral-infographic_n_1421812.html) (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Mackey, "African Critics of Kony Campaign See a 'White Man's Burden' for the Facebook Generation," *New York Times*, March 9, 2012, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/african-critics-of-kony-campaign-hear-echoes-of-the-white-mans-burden> (accessed February 18, 2013).

create a world where his own child could be freed from the potential harms of dangerous and powerful men like Joseph Kony.

When Russell suffered from an emotional breakdown after the dizzying rush of positive attention was followed by a rapid-fire, sharp and scathing criticism of his efforts, he became a laughingstock as jokes about his illness circulated along with an eyewitness video clip, only seconds in length, of his emotional breakdown. Both mainstream and online journalists offered a voyeuristic and cruel response to the psychotic episode with jokes, ridicule, shame, and public humiliation.<sup>18</sup>

When we look at how audiences responded to Kony2012, we see how important the concept of genre becomes in the meaning-making process. An informal review of comment threads posted on YouTube over just two days in March reveals that viewers' interpretation of the work varied greatly depending on whether they perceived the work as journalism, advocacy, or art.

Some viewers interpreted Russell's video as a form of journalism, recognizing its aim to inform. They recognized that viral video has a distinctive, biased point of view because they could identify information that was inaccurate, outdated and omitted. For example, one viewer, CJ, asks:

Why has the media been so soft on IC [Invisible Children]? It needs to be stated the way he has been using outdated footage of the situation in Africa is wrong. He could have taken recent footage to explain these countries are rebuilding. Instead he used a past atrocity to promote IC which Ugandans have been suspicious of for years. Critics, Ugandans and humanitarian workers are not getting a proper voice in this IC campaign scandal. Please represent both sides.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ford Vox, "Sharing Public Breakdowns: What We Can Learn From Jason Russell," *Atlantic*, March 17, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/03/sharing-public-breakdowns-what-we-can-learn-from-jason-russell/254659/> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> CJ, March 17, 2012 (2:33 p.m.), comment on Alyssa Newcomb, "Kony 2012 Filmmaker's Wife: Naked Public Meltdown 'Irrational'" [comment], *ABC News*, March 17, 2012, 2:08 P.M., <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/kony-2012-filmmakers-wife-naked-public-meltdown-irrational/> (accessed March 29, 2013).

Some members of the audience recognized Russell's video as a form of advocacy for a worthwhile cause, helping diminish the apathy and ignorance of the American public through an effective emotional appeal. Viewers who recognized the creative use of techniques to create emotional resonance appreciated the video as a form of positive propaganda or advocacy. For example, hopesprings52 wrote:

The youtube video Kony2012 is absolutely brilliant. It's difficult to understand why he and Invisible Children have come under such attack. It's a revolutionary high-tech way of raising awareness and pressure to capture a monster who is wanted for international war crimes.<sup>20</sup>

Still other members of the audience recognized the viral video as a form of art, the highest expression of our complex and multifaceted human identity. In responding to the video, these viewers held on to their empathy and respect for Russell even in the face of his on-camera humiliation in the public sphere. Some people's perception of the work as art enabled them to respond to the artist with a sense of emotional connectedness. For example, justme wrote:

I feel so very sorry for this young man. Unless any of you have had Something so Big overcome you and strips away your emotional rational thinking, then one will never know the pain. The deep darkness that consumes you. He tried with what he could and I feel very sorry this has taken a toll on him.<sup>21</sup>

Here this commentator is responding to the artist—the young man who went to Africa in 2003, thinking he was going to report on what was happening in Darfur, when he found the children who were brutalized by Kony. In this account, Jason Russell is to be commended for being a true believer in the power of communication to change the

---

<sup>20</sup> Hopesprings52, March 18, 2012 (1:12 a.m.), comment on Alyssa Newcomb, "Kony 2012 Filmmaker's Wife: Naked Public Meltdown 'Irrational'" [comment], *ABC News*, March 17, 2012, 2:08 P.M., <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/kony-2012-filmmakers-wife-naked-public-meltdown-irrational/> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> justme, March 17, 2012 (9:17 a.m.), comment on Alyssa Newcomb, "Kony 2012 Filmmaker's Wife: Naked Public Meltdown 'Irrational'" [comment], *ABC News*, March 17, 2012, 2:08 P.M., <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/03/kony-2012-filmmakers-wife-naked-public-meltdown-irrational/> (accessed March 29, 2013).



world. With his limited skills, ability and budget, he did what he could for a cause that mattered to him by representing the social world from his position as an artist, activist and idealist.

#### IV.

Today, many of us enjoy an opportunity to pass along the entertainment and information that we encounter online. That is why nearly every web page now proudly displays the little Facebook and Twitter icons of sharing. So why are people engaging in such seemingly indiscriminate digital sharing of propaganda, art and journalism?

As it turns out, we share works that require our active interpretation. The rise of the genre of creative nonfiction comes from this impulse, according to Jim D'Agata, who argues that we read nonfiction for the poetry of the experience rather than for mere accuracy.<sup>22</sup> And because of genre blurriness, it is not always easy to make sense of what we see, watch and read. To understand works that stand at the intersection of journalism, art and advocacy, we need to share our interpretations with others. That is why we crave engagement with works that are symbolically complex.

We are especially hungry to share our interpretations about media messages that represent reality in ways that use artifice and imagination. David Shields explores these issues in his book, *Reality Hunger*. All the distinctions between the original and the plagiarized, the scripted and the unscripted, the serious and the sensational, the fictional and the nonfictional are evaporating. Why? Humans need novelty and complexity in order to pay attention, and too often, standardized, familiar genres—like traditional journalism—can deaden our senses. The representation of reality needs constant renewal. Shields writes, “The impulse to shape experience is as strong as the impulse to reveal it.”<sup>23</sup>

Through their work, authors, journalists, artists, and propagandists all seek to wake up audiences. Shields writes, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art exists that we may recover

---

<sup>22</sup> John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *Lifespan of a Fact* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); see also Gideon Lewis-Kraus, “The Fact-Checker Versus the Fabulist,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/magazine/the-fact-checker-versus-the-fabulist.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>23</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 49.

the sensation of life.”<sup>24</sup> Mark Nash describes artists as “double agents crossing back and forth between art and society.”<sup>25</sup> For example, documentary filmmakers—ever since Robert Flaherty, who at the turn of the twentieth century pioneered the creation of the genre with his film *Nanook of the North*—have revealed a fundamental paradox that is true of all symbolic forms: to represent reality, you sometimes have to fake it.<sup>26</sup>

Anthony Wing Kosner, writing about the “almost true,” points this out: “Perhaps the almost true is potent precisely because the audience has to bridge the gap of truth and in so doing become complicit in its viral spreading. The almost true *needs us* in a way that the actual truth does not. This is an established principle of theatre, of art, that the audience completes the illusion—makes it more real than real.”<sup>27</sup>

We need to think more about why and how audiences choose to engage—and what engagement means in the context of the Internet, social media and online journalism. All works of human creativity—in both the genres of art and journalism—are “open” and “unstable,” susceptible to a wide range of interpretations. For this reason, as readers/viewers/listeners, we are the critical agents in the meaning-making process.

## V.

In a profound sense, we make our own reality by the interpretations we make of our immediate experience plus the vast array of media messages that surround us. It is why I care more about addressing the receivers of propaganda than berating the propagandists. Alfredo Cramerotti explains, “To ground the idea of ‘reality’ in its reception rather than its representation is one way to

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Nash, “Reality in the Age of Aesthetics,” *Frieze Magazine*, April 2008, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/reality\\_in\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_aesthetics/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/reality_in_the_age_of_aesthetics/) (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in Cinema and Other Media*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Kosner, “Mike Daisey, Kony 2012, and the Viral Allure of the Almost True,” *Forbes*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonykosner/2012/03/19/mike-daisey-kony-2012s-jason-russell-and-the-viral-allure-of-the-almost-true> (accessed February 18, 2013).

retain the ability to build our own ‘truth claim’ for what is represented, instead of the material making such claims for itself.”<sup>28</sup>

For these reasons, I am interested in making sure that people activate critical thinking skills in responding to all forms of media, whether that be art, journalism or advocacy. I am interested in making sure people have a deep awareness of *how much we need each other* in the intensely social process of meaning-making and interpretation. What do people need to be able to know and be able to do, individually and collaboratively, when it comes to making sense of the many different messages and the increasingly blurry genres that are part of the crowded and ever-changed digital landscape?

As we see increasing support for the use of digital media in the K–16 landscape, there has been a rise of interest in supporting learners with the knowledge and skills of digital citizenship. Here it becomes important to distinguish between *tool literacies* and *literacies of representation*.<sup>29</sup> Tool literacies emphasize the knowledge and competencies involved in using digital media; these are undoubtedly important core skills for participating in contemporary culture today. Representational literacies—which include information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, and news literacy—emphasize access, analysis, reflection, and social action competencies associated with particular types of symbol systems. Representational literacies enable people to identify author purpose, target audience, bias, and point of view, supporting engagement in the kind of active, critical thinking about the messages that we both produce and consume as part of daily life.

These ideas are embodied in the key concepts of digital and media literacy: (1) messages are symbolic representations of reality; (2) messages use different genres, codes, and conventions; (3) people interpret messages differently based on their life experiences and cultural backgrounds; (4) messages circulate within an economic and political context; and (5) messages influence attitudes and behavior as representing a form of social power.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Alfredo Cramerotti and Simon Sheikh, “The Production of Truth, the Aesthetics of Journalism,” *Digimag*, June 2011, <http://alcramer.net/library/file/The%20production%20of%20truth.%20The%20aesthetics%20of%20journalism%20-%20Alfredo%20Cramerotti-2.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Tyner, *Media Literacy: New Agendas in Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 132.

<sup>30</sup> “Core Principles of MLE,” National Association for Media Literacy Education, <http://namle.net/publications/core-principles/> (accessed February 18, 2013).

For scholars and educators in many fields, the exploration of the complex relationship between authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representations and realities is what enables us to understand the social and natural world. The very soul of the rhetorical act is built on the relationship between authors—filmmakers, bloggers, visual artists, propagandists, and journalists—who use symbols in imaginative ways to express meanings and audiences—readers, viewers, and listeners—who make interpretations. Being an imaginative and skillful author is dependent on being a competent, socially responsive reader. Indeed, this is why literacy, in the most expansive sense of the term, is truly essential for democracy.<sup>31</sup>

More than anything, I want viewers and listeners of Mike Daisey’s monologue and Jason Russell’s video to have the receptive, critical, and interpretive skills to recognize the big ideas at the heart of a work and the competence, tenacity, and drive to identify and interrogate the aesthetic and rhetorical techniques used to construct it. Ultimately, as Robert Scholes has put it, I want people to be both sympathetic and critical readers and writers.<sup>32</sup>

Writers and readers are equally responsible for the process of seeking and telling the truth. Playing the blame game by dismissing some work as mere propaganda or setting up rigid rules for representing truth obscures this fundamental principle. Historians of journalism have told us this for years: in fact, American democracy was born under a partisan press, where nothing you read in a colonial newspaper could be considered “reliable.”<sup>33</sup> Even though some of us twentieth-century souls may crave the comfort and simplicity of having a one-stop-shopping experience by reading the *New York Times* and relying on responsible journalists to “tell us the truth,” it is not—and never has been—the solution to participating fully in the democratic process of self-governance.

When we can acknowledge and celebrate the fundamentally relational dimensions of literacy in the twenty-first century, we can engage in important conversations where we share meaning and build

---

<sup>31</sup> Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in a Digital Age* (Washington DC: The Aspen Institute 2009), 62.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1998), 168.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

understanding to find out what exactly we can trust and believe. That is why ambiguous, incomplete, blurry, and biased information plays such a key role in democracy—it inspires us to have conversations, share ideas, and listen to each other as a means to find truth. Whether we do that face-to-face or with new digital tools, it is through our network of social relationships that we exercise the communication, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration skills needed for citizenship in an always-on, constantly connected world.