

Art or Activism: Is There a Choice?

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It is quite true that misinformation, and outright lying has been used as a political tool for centuries. Today, we have a paradox. The hysterically inaccurate information that we are sometimes presented with so quickly and so easily due entirely to the speed of communication via the internet can just as quickly and easily be discredited and dismissed, and yet it often isn't. It's often accepted and spread faster than ever before.

We are a generation with access to information on a scale never seen before, and yet we tend to rely on how others interpret that information, rather than investigating for ourselves. Often the misinformation is presented in such a dramatic and sinister manner, so as to appeal to our preconceived prejudices (of which we all have) about the given topic, and so we don't tend to then spend time proving the claims wrong.

These words are taken from a Wordpress blog with the curious title of “Futile Democracy”². We don't know why the author has chosen this title, or feels that democracy is a futile ideal, nor even if it is a man or a woman blogger. The paragraphs come from a piece that he or she wrote to counteract a number of articles that appeared in Britain in the so-called tabloid or popular press. We are all familiar with this sort of thing, headlines screaming: “Illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers get more state money than our pensioners!” or “Foreign rapists, murderers and

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² <http://futile democracy.wordpress.com>

thieves here that we can't deport!". The blogger has put a great deal of effort into examining the real statistics behind these headlines, seeking out the government press releases that triggered them and setting out the legal frameworks to which they refer. In all cases, the blogger shows distinctly that the newspaper articles are false, twisting facts and figures out of all proportion, misquoting official sources and presenting misleading stories.

The problem is that these kinds of newspapers reach huge audiences. The Daily Mail and The Sun are the two largest selling papers in the UK, reaching a readership of around twelve million people per day, and that's not counting the vastly higher number of people visiting their websites, a hundred million per month for the Daily Mail alone. These types of media rarely, if ever, correct their published articles, except in small mentions hidden away on their back pages.

What is resistance in this context? Is it possible to resist? And why should we be bothered to resist?

The Mission of Public Institutions

There is a question in the title of this paper. Art or Activism: is there a choice? The answer depends on what we believe is the mission of public institutions. The wonderful projects presented in this conference indicate that heritage institutions not only *ought* to take a stand, but that they can and are doing so, thus linking public participation with democratic values and processes. This conference's host, NCK, obviously uses heritage – the past – to learn how to understand the present and to prepare the public to engage with the past in order to envision a better future.

It's likely that the missions of most museums, education services, heritage sites or similar public institutions contain some reference to the on-going education of their communities. This is education in its broadest sense, using cultural expressions of various types, including humankind's achievements in architecture, agriculture, or art. It's also likely that part of the mission is about enhancing people's capacity to understand the complexities of human condition. This entails combatting stereotypes and stimulating people to think, rather than unconsciously accepting the types of simplistic messages that overwhelm everyone today and indeed are similar to those that formed the propaganda of the past. In other words, to come back to our anonymous blogger, to investigate rather than merely accepting other people's

interpretations. It is in this sense of encouraging thoughtful reflection and investigation that we *resist* as part of our public mission.

Levels of Resistance, Levels of Support

What is more difficult is to decide which aspects of our human race's history and present are appropriate for a public institution to deal with. To what degree should the interaction with the public take place? Where is our comfort zone? What is beyond that zone? The word inspiration has a positive connotation while confrontation, in the English language at least, feels less comfortable.³ Let's look at some examples on a continuum.

We may inspire various publics to open their minds and see an issue from an alternative perspective. The Detroit Historical Museum has constructed streets of old Detroit that are fun for both adults and children. Their website now features online games for the general public, teachers and students with images, social and historical data from 1600 through 1901, including the arrivals of various waves of immigrants, both from within the USA and from abroad. Clearly, visitors' own personal perspectives will be opened when participating.

Historic sites and museums may provoke the public to shake themselves out of a habitual way of thinking. The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Michigan, apart from being marvellous places full of wonderful indoor and outdoor exhibits, may cast a different light on the history of slavery in the USA.⁴

Exhibitions may confront the public with hard truths. For a mere six months in 1994–1995, in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Belgium, the Royal Army Museum in Brussels created one of the most comprehensive exhibitions about World War II ever assembled. "J'avais 25 en '45" (I was 25 in '45) was a massive undertaking, including collections from every country that had participated in any way in the war, some of whom would still disagree on the historical interpretation of the material. It comprised virtually every type of display, from the highly technological to old-fashioned displays of manuscripts in glass cases. Attending with my mother who had lived through the period, it was clear that my

³ Although in Latin languages confrontation may simply indicate comparing two different ways of thinking or doing.

⁴ Although it must be said that slavery – and also the labor union movement by the way – is portrayed there in a rather wholesome manner, lessening the potential for positive provocation.

own reading of the bombings of, say, Dresden, or Hiroshima and Nagasaki – to me, criminal acts, unjustifiable in view of contemporary historical and military analysis – did not at all match with hers. To her, the Allied countries were obliged to do such things to stop the war. My mother is 90 years old. While I might want to encourage young people to take an objective and critical view of current events, might I prefer to leave my mother in peace with her memories?

Finally, going further, we may feel the importance of presenting controversial perspectives that may be hard to accept or even unacceptable for a certain section of our community. Hypothetically, this might be an exhibition tracing the history and dangers to women of illegal abortion or female circumcision. In these cases the careful construction of a pedagogical pathway giving various cultural perspectives would be important. But isn't it more important to make the effort to encourage people to reflect on all the issues rather than to shy away from potential controversy?

Free Speech and Human Rights

In the last few years a few initiatives have sprung up that bring together the arts sector with free speech and human rights NGOs. Sharing sector-specific knowledge has proved to be mutually supportive. On the one hand, free speech and human rights organisations can clarify the legal parameters of our right to say or show what is potentially controversial. On the other hand, arts organisations deal with artists, artistic processes and works that may play expressly with boundaries and taboos.

From freedom of expression NGOs such as *Index on Censorship* or *Article 19*, an international network of lawyers defending free speech, we learn for example, that the many international treaties and conventions guaranteeing freedom of expression, and increasingly we are talking about freedom of artistic expression, actually permit the freedom to offend. Incitement to racial hatred is not permitted but there are very, very strictly-defined exceptions, permitted to protect:

- rights and reputations of others
- national security
- public order
- public health
- public morals

But, sowing discord in society or painting a false image of the state would fail the test. A desire to shield a government from criticism can never justify limitations on free speech.⁵ The UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) has stressed that expression also includes controversial, false or even shocking expression. The mere fact that an idea is disliked or thought to be incorrect does not justify its censorship.⁶ Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression [...] to seek, receive and impart information and ideas”.

The UDHR is not legally binding, but it is the basis for a number of international conventions, such as economic, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights – legally binding for the states that have signed them. There is also the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 22 (2000) that guarantees every person’s access to as wide a range of information and viewpoints as possible. This is the right to information, which has emerged as a new right, distinct but inseparable from the right to freedom of expression.⁷

Regarding censorship, and the subtle and difficult decisions that public institutions have to make these days, Index on Censorship organised a fascinating conference “Taking the Offensive – defending artistic freedom of expression in the UK” in January 2013.⁸ It was a high level, invitation-only conference whose many distinguished speakers included the Director of the Tate Gallery and Tate Britain, Nicolas Serota; the Head of the Association of Chief Police Officers; the Head of BBC World Service's Asia & Pacific Region; the Director of the British Board of Film Classification (censors) as well as various artists. The conference covered issues such as self-censorship, the role of boards on censorship issues (the role of chief executives, who should intervene?) and the influence of sponsors in such decisions.

Whereas its fairly easy to say, “my organisation would never censor and would certainly uphold the agreed conventions against censorship”, it’s much more difficult in situations when, for example, a large public demonstration is happening outside your doorstep, consisting of a part of your community that in principle, you would normally want to support. This might be a religious group that opposes the contemporary treatment of an issue, such as homosexuality. Or a critique that claims

⁵ <http://www.article19.org/pages/en/limitations.html>

⁶ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/WhatareHumanRights.aspx>

⁷ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

⁸ <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/takingtheoffensive/>

a traditionally conservative community is covering up instances of incest or sexual abuse in their community. Or the crowd may be demonstrating against the ethics of the financial sponsor of the exhibition, as has happened recently to the Sydney Biennale of Art.

Who do we support? The whistle-blower or the conservative elements in the community? If our mission of resistance, as public institutions, is about carefully encouraging people to reflect and think from different perspectives, whose sensibilities should we protect? It's not only about incoming migrant groups either. In the last years radical Christian groups, notably in France, have mobbed theatres presenting plays – deemed to be sacrilegious – from Italy and Latin America.

Remember, the law states that every person has the right to both access to and expression of the widest range possible of information and viewpoints, even if they may offend, criticise or annoy the government or a segment of the population. It is in giving access to these viewpoints that our public missions reside.

Why do We Want to Take a Stand?

Public institutions more than ever before need to attract audiences, to engage with local communities and to appear, and to really be, welcoming and listening. Why on earth should we even consider presenting alternative views that may risk to annoy or even offend? We all know by now that histories are subjective, coloured by the prevailing ideologies of the time, subject to cover-ups, conditioned by whose side you were on and ultimately subject to revisions at future dates.

Historian Mir Tamim Ansary says in the forward to his book “Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes” (2009) that he was prompted to write it after years of accepting the Western hegemony of written history. Ansary worked as an editor of school books. Over the years, he gradually observed that his attempts to re-balance history by adding facts about the Islamic World were always rejected by his colleagues. That is, until Sept 11, 2001 when all eyes turned east and history books began to change. So, we have a responsibility to those marginalised by official histories as well as to the present and future generations, to allow access to histories seen through the eyes of others.

Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher, maintains that it is only through the humanities, including the arts, that people can exercise empathy – a quality that

she deems is the fundamental human capacity required for true democracy. In her book “Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the humanities” (2010) she states that without empathy democracy cannot exist. Empathy is not necessarily agreeing with another, but understanding why he or she behaves in a certain way; how people are motivated. Learning this, she says, is the result of participation in the arts and humanities. It teaches us tolerance of other views and the capacity to be able to compromise and to live alongside one another – part of a democratic society.

This is also illustrated in the 2003 book, “Reading Lolita in Tehran – A Memoir in Books” by Afar Nafisi, an account of a literature professor aiming to teach her students precisely this. We can totally despise the character that Nabokov creates, sexually obsessed by an underage girl, but having the emotional and mental capacity to understand his context and his motives will leave us with a greater capacity to understand the human condition, even if we disagree with the action. Therefore we also have a responsibility to stretch the capacity for understanding in our audiences, visitors or participants.

Presentation: The Matter of How

The question is not only about what to present. This will of course depend on the organisation’s mission, vision and context. The problem is how we present certain issues to our audiences and visitors.

I have struggled with my own commitment to the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel.⁹ As the former Secretary General of a large international association for the performing arts for almost 20 years, I was never able to correctly frame this in order to have a thoughtful and considered debate on the subject amongst association members. It was the *how* that continually escaped me. How to frame it? How to present it?

Tempers flared too quickly even at the mention of the issue. Although the boycott specifically only relates to institutions funded by the current Israeli government and not to individuals, firmly entrenched beliefs obstructed people’s capacity to stop to listen to diverse viewpoints and thoughtfully consider matters. In other public panels on the subject, such as at Belgium’s International Centre for Urbanism, Architecture and Landscape (CIVA) I have tried to present a logical analysis of boycotts in general,

⁹ <http://www.pacbi.org>

setting out what they do, where or when they may be effective, and why someone may choose to select this non-violent method to support any given cause. But emotions and tempers always reign and attempts at objectivity fail. In other words, taking a stand and linking participants with democratic processes and values is not always so easy. Human history is a history of hurts, of unhealed wounds that open afresh at the slightest nudge, whether perceived or real.

Art as Resistance

But as Gilles Deleuze famously said, art is resistance. Resistance to the status quo, to un-interrogated beliefs and to received and unquestioned wisdom. I currently work with an organisation called freeDimensional.¹⁰ We work with artists and culture workers who, at this very moment and on a day to day basis, put their very lives (and often that of their families and friends) on the line for the sake of freedom of expression, of belief, of religion and of life choices. These artists and cultural communicators are threatened, endangered, abused, or imprisoned by repressive governments, religious or social factions. We support them in various ways but especially by identifying safe shelters from which they can continue to create and express their artistic work – work that speaks truth to power and upholds social justice values. Artistic work that takes a stand, that resists un-interrogated beliefs, and that often has consequences. We do that in part by placing them in artists residencies all over the world. The artists residencies must also consider the reaction of their communities, of giving safe haven to these artists who have often transgressed political, religious, gender or social boundaries controversially in their countries of origin. Those who accept to give temporary shelter to artists who are facing severe repression have decided that it is within their mission to support, as we call it, *creative resistance*.

Public institutions need to know how to frame potentially controversial issues linked to the belief in social justice and democratic values. We need to know how to present work in a safe environment that encourages thoughtful questioning and the exercise of the empathetic mind that Nussbaum speaks of. We need to know how to prepare our communities for such explorations so that the situation never arises of the angry crowd of people demonstrating outside the building who have never read

¹⁰ www.freedimensional.org

the book, seen the play or looked at the exhibition. We need to link to others in our community who want to encourage curiosity, learning, closer examination and the positive desire of what our blogger calls investigating for ourselves.

Per Non Concludere

Not to conclude, but to offer another quotation by David Heckman on the theme of resistance as a duty to our comfortable populations and those who are on the margins, to our history and our futures:

While some of us might be stuck, marching in lockstep to the beat of salaries and prestige, there are still too many millions -- sick, imprisoned, dispossessed, disenfranchised, dying, alone, and forgotten -- who might be willing to trade away some of their instability for some of our security. And, perhaps, in the process of this exchange, we might remember what it was like to actually be human -- not as an intellectual exercise or cultural safari, but as a transformation. We might get comfortable with risks. We might learn to be perturbed. Most importantly, we might become accountable to the sleeping old man we step around when we take a walk through the city at night, the ruddy-faced woman who constantly mutters menacing words as she paces the streets for endless hours, the filthy child who sits and rocks with his face buried in a jar of glue, the man who itches his scabbed arms and insists that he needs a dollar because he's "hungry," or the last remaining member of a family who is digging for the children that are buried under a pile of American-made rubble. Arm in arm, we can live and die in resistance to the morbid profiteering of our future.¹¹

¹¹ <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue8/heckman.htm>