

Dear class,

Things have changed. The world has changed. But has our work changed?

Yes and no.

I mean, have you heard of the Internet?

For the record, it's March 20. Today is the first full day of spring 2020. Birds are singing and snow is melting. But schools and libraries are closed. Curling rinks and ski hills are closed. The American border is about to close at midnight. Confirmed cases of a virus are adding up all over the world.

I may just be a part-time journalist turned communications writer who lectures about literary nonfiction, but I have something to say about this work. It has always involved vigilance and courage in holding power to account. It's about supporting an open exchange of views on how we want to live our lives. It's also about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. And it's about the record, which we have to establish now more than ever.

Let me digress. Journalism is one the most democratic jobs because anyone can be a journalist. You just have to be curious and willing to learn. You don't even have to go to j-school!¹ The best skill you could possibly learn—in class or in the newsroom—is “crap detecting”². American media theorist Neil Postman was talking to teachers when he first said that, but journalists should hear it too.

Because Canadian journalism is in a tight spot. It's not so much a journalism problem as a business model problem. Journalism can still deliver, sure. The best audio, video and text produced nationally, regionally, and locally keeps people informed. But does it pay its journalists? Some of that work—paid, even poorly—holds powerful people and businesses responsible for their actions. In its ideal (but hard to find) form, it is lubricant for public debate.

How much of what he's saying is crap? Are we going to take this crap?

It can educate, criticize, entertain, and publicize. But what journalists are really doing, when they are publishing or broadcasting, is amplifying. And how we choose what to amplify, or how we allow ourselves to be told what to amplify, is why we need better crap detection.

For example: on Monday, March 16, I received a press release about a remote-controlled vibrator which assured me that the best thing about it was its covert use in public. Here's an accurate, translated quote: “So even while stocking up on pasta and toilet paper at the

¹ Sorry!

² Postman, Neil. “[Bullshit and the Art of Crap-Detection](#).” Speech, National Convention for the Teachers of English, Washington, D.C., Nov. 28, 1969.

supermarket, you can still have fun from afar. And with your medical masks, you'll have even less chance of being noticed. Your beatific smile will be hidden."

Who wrote this crap?

There's no way I would amplify that. (I know I just did, hush.) But instead of just calling it crap, I think the media's current output of clickbait needs a more diplomatic metaphor. Russian investigative journalist Alexey Kovalev nailed it when he called misreported or made-up news "chaff"³. All news-clogging content, no matter how malicious or lazy or distasteful, could just be compared to dry husks devoid of nutritional value.

Please indulge this extension of the metaphor: Fill both hands with just an hour's worth of today's videos, posts, and reports. Blow hard into your palms. You'll find yourself surrounded by a cloud of floating chaff holding only a kernel or two of good grain.

That's the work you want to do. There it is in your palm.

Don't worry about it too much. The best way to do good work is to do a lot of work. I have written so much chaff...

When I was a student, taking this class that I'm currently teaching, I don't recall much of what we read. But I do remember when my classmate Michelle handed me the novel *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut.

Vonnegut, like many serious writers, tried to change the world. He changed mine. Isn't that enough? It should be.

His best quote is for other serious writers. He wrote: "Bill Gates says, 'Wait till you can see what your computer can become.' But it's you who should be doing the becoming, not the damn fool computer. What you can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do."⁴

Although he doesn't incite violence against machines he does conclude with: "Electronic communities build nothing. How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you any different."

I disagree with the old, flatulent Luddite about nothing being built online. But the other parts are nice. So, I'll take what works and leave the rest.

As long as I'm on the subject of American science fiction writers, here's a well-polished little nut from a speech by Ursula K. Le Guin. It was reprinted in 2016 as "The Operating Instructions" in *Words Are My Matter*.

³ Lammer, Aaron. "Longform Podcast #229: Alexey Kovalev." Longform.org. Podcast audio, Jan. 25, 2017. <https://longform.org/posts/longform-podcast-229-alexey-kovalev>.

⁴ Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005.

She said: “Incoherent and commercialized and worm-eaten with porn and hype and blather as it is, electronic publication offers those who read a strong new means of active community.”

That was about books. But it’s another nice sentiment that we can use. This time, from a writing champion who, in 2014, used her acceptance speech for her National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters to call out publishers, their sales departments, and Amazon. She even called out other writers for accepting their crap. She destroyed them without raising her voice.

“I think hard times are coming,” she said, “when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now...”

We’ve been too distracted by all that porn, hype, and blather—all that chaff—to realize that the hard times are already here. And, unfortunately, harder times are right around the corner.

Because a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 has been taken seriously in Canada for only a week now. It was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization on Jan. 30, 2020. That was just a month after it was first reported in Wuhan, China.

We’re going to need writers, reporters, and producers of all kinds like we haven’t needed them in a long time. As things continue to change, who else is going to keep track of where we were, where we wanted to go, and where we’ll be forced to go?

Now... This is going to sound weird... But just in case certain people read this letter as a writing contest entry⁵ I need to add some Canadian Content.

“The medium is the message,” wrote Marshall McLuhan in 1964’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

McLuhan meant many things by that. But primarily, this communications thinker was saying: the channel through which a message is sent affects the sender, the transmission, and the receiver. The medium—be it a postcard or a DM or a brick with a note attached to it—says a lot more than just the contents of that message.

Postman, the guy calling for the detection of crap, wrote a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1985. He didn’t deny McLuhan’s famous aphorism but he suggested that the medium was actually a metaphor, that a new technology is “not merely an extension of man’s power... but a transformation of his way of thinking.”

⁵ Don’t ask.

Do you remember how loud and incomprehensible the debates were during the 2019 Canadian federal election? What did we expect? A cacophony of pleading, insulting, calling out, and waving off—looks like a normal Twitter thread to me.

“Each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility,” said Postman.

But also: “No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are.”

The keyword here is excessively. Do you see where I’m going with this?

Look, our work is about trust. Strong journalism that supports civil society and encourages debate can only be done if the reader trusts the writer. So, please tell me, because I don’t know: How can we build trust on the digital dais of an untrustworthy company?

Because of a bill that became U.S. law in 1996 called the Communications Decency Act, and particularly because of its Section 230, internet companies can publish content but can’t be held accountable for illegal or defamatory content the way publishers would be.⁶ That’s why they’re “platforms” not publishers, even though they publish stuff all the time.

Facebook, an advertising company that advertises itself as a social media company, would be untrustworthy even if it hadn’t allegedly avoided taxes⁷, or given its users’ data to political operatives⁸, or hosted content that incited genocide⁹. I’m not even going to mention all the other things it’s done. The last one mentioned should be enough.

They are as untrustworthy as all who offer panacea. But even more so if that panacea is “free and always will be.”

“What are you going to do, not use Facebook?” is a rhetorical question that I often hear in the back of my mind in the voice of *Canadaland*’s Jesse Brown. (It’s not that bad to have him in there, but I’m afraid he’ll never leave now that I’ve let him in.) This question encouraged

⁶ Gillette, Felix. “Section 230 Was Supposed to Make the Internet a Better Place. It Failed.” Bloomberg Businessweek.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-08-07/section-230-was-supposed-to-make-the-internet-a-better-place-it-failed> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁷ Paul, Katie. “Facebook faces tax court trial over Ireland offshore deal.” Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-tax/facebook-faces-tax-court-trial-over-ireland-offshore-deal-idUSKBN20C2CQ> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁸ Cadwalladr, Carole, and Emma Graham-Harrison. “Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach.” The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁹ Mozur, Paul. “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar’s Military.” The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html> (accessed March 20, 2020).

me to delete Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp from my personal and working life.

But he's right. We are now a social-media-based culture. The culture's logic dictates that a critic of social media would do well to share his or her warnings on social media. Postman experienced this irony many times, "in being told that I must appear on television to promote a book that warns people against television."

One irony that serves me well is that if I'm told I need social media to build my personal brand, I can say that part of my personal brand is that I'm not on social media.¹⁰

Don't get me started on branding, another agricultural metaphor that needs examining...

Here's the kicker of our society's full acceptance of social media: in these trying times, social media platforms will be indispensable tools to emergency doctors, to frontline workers, and to determined volunteers. Simultaneously, it will seethe with the misinformation that every crisis seems to attract.

The idea that you must be on social media is insulting to the people who are not and never will be on social media. Could the afflicted please tweet out the nature of their affliction in five words?

My sarcasm: let me put it aside for a moment. Because there is nothing better than social media for giving voice to the voiceless. The falling cost of connecting with like-minded people¹¹, the megaphone signal of hashtags, and the theoretic democratization of information—all this is good.

But what about the homeless? What about the elderly? What about the destitute poor? If we rely on social media so we can tell their stories, we'll just be accepting another truism of Silicon Valley.

The party's in here, buddy. What are you waiting for?

My crap detector was always beeping when I heard that. Now, with social isolation practices and the Prime Minister of Canada suggesting FaceTime, my crap detector is howling.

Journalism's function, more than anything, should be about establishing the record. More than ever, as everyone with an Internet connection scrambles for information about this invisible virus coming for our asthmatics, our cancer patients, and our otherwise healthy grandparents.

¹⁰ Except LinkedIn. Fight me.

¹¹ Klein, Ezra and Jay Rosen. "Jay Rosen is pessimistic about the media. So am I." Vox.com. Podcast audio, Oct. 18, 2018.

<https://www.vox.com/ezra-klein-show-podcast/2018/10/22/17991170/press-media-trump-polarization-jay-rosen-avenatti>.

We should not be trying to get the eyeballs. We should not give in to bland brand buzzwords. We should create something of value that says: look at this person. Look at what she is doing. This is who she is. Do you think we should all be like her too?

Don't let anybody tell you any different.

Okay. Just because it's the apocalypse doesn't mean your final stories aren't due in four weeks.

Thanks for reading,

Joe

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