

## Content creation: In your eyes

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*The third and final part of my series on the pedagogy of content creation is out this morning on Substack, and I am sharing this one here because it pulls together the themes I have been developing as a result of a conversation I had with Jacqueline last Sunday morning.*

*The first two instalments in this series are available [here](#) and [here](#).*

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Let me return, in the third part of this series, to the observation my wife made during the conversations that led me to write it. She said my aim when creating content, whether I realise it or not, is to draw attention to an issue whilst empowering the person reading or viewing it to recognise their own agency.

I have been musing on that sentence because it is doing more work than it first appears to. The two halves are not as obviously connected as they sound.

Attracting attention to an issue is relatively easy, or at least achievable. You can do it through argument, through evidence, through the disruption of a comfortable assumption; through, in other words, the kind of wonder I wrote about [in the first of these essays](#). *But attention and agency are different things. You can pay close attention to a problem and still feel entirely powerless in the face of it. In fact, in some ways, close attention without agency makes powerlessness worse, not better.*

*This is one of the failure modes I see most often in the kind of content I try not to make. I see too much documentation of injustice done with great care and accuracy, which then leaves the audience well-informed and utterly defeated. I read far too many books of this sort, and I think there is something almost self-indulgent about that kind of content, despite much of it being technically accomplished. It offers the creator the satisfaction of having told the truth, and offers the audience the comfort of shared despair, but it changes nothing, hence the self-indulgence. Outrage without possibility is not, in the end, communication. It is a form of sophisticatedly constructed complaint.*

*The other failure mode is the opposite. That mode delivers false optimism. This content softens the edges of a problem in the interests of leaving people feeling better than the situation warrants. This is dishonest, and people feel it, even when they cannot say exactly why something rings hollow. The audience is not stupid. If you are telling them everything will turn out fine when the evidence suggests it will not, they will sense the gap between what you are saying and what you know. So much of the mainstream news media is now of this sort, regurgitating the messages of this type that spew forth from politicians, think tanks and corporations.*

*The path between those two modes of failure is genuinely narrow. What it requires is holding simultaneously in mind an honest account of how bad things are, backed by a coherent explanation of why they came to be that way, and a prescription for action that points not to easy solutions, but to the fact that things could be otherwise.*

*It is in that last element that agency lives. People cannot act on a situation they believe to be fixed. And one of the most politically consequential things that decades of a particular kind of economics has achieved is to make the current distribution of power and wealth seem like the natural and inevitable outcome of impersonal forces rather than the result of decisions that were made by people and so could, by people, be in a very literal sense be unmade.*

*Counter that framing with evidence and argument and, when necessary, with the kind of wonder that makes someone stop and reconsider, and you have done something that matters. That is not because the person hearing or reading the message will immediately act on it. Very little content of consequence produces action in such a simple causal sense. Instead, if it succeeds, it creates the recognition that things could be different, and that is the necessary precondition for anyone deciding that their engagement with the world is worth the bother.*

*The Brazilian pedagogist [Paulo Freire](#), who thought more carefully about this than almost anyone, called this process conscientisation, which is the development in people of a critical awareness of their own capacity to act. He was writing about formal education in conditions far more extreme than anything I am dealing with, but the core of his idea works for me as a content creator. Awareness and agency have to grow together. Information delivered to a passive audience does not, by itself, create anything except a better-informed passivity. Instead, what you are looking for is the moment when someone stops seeing themselves as a spectator to forces beyond their control and starts seeing themselves as a participant in something that is at least partly within their reach.*

*That is what the work is for. It is not about seeking agreement, let alone conversion. Instead, it is about the creation of conditions in which someone discovers, for themselves, in their own time, that they can think about this, that they have a view on it, and that their view on it is not entirely without consequence in the world.*

*I find myself thinking, when I try to describe what it feels like when that actually happens, of a Peter Gabriel song. In Your Eyes is ostensibly about two people, and about the particular quality of being truly seen by another person. But the line that stays with me is this (and I have edited it slightly, as the text is broken for musical effect in the song):*

*In your eyes, I see the resolution of all the fruitless searches.*

What strikes me about that is where the resolution lives. It is not in the search itself. Nor is it in the searcher. It is in the encounter. The meaning completes itself not in what is made but in the moment it meets the person for whom it resonates.

That is the symbiosis I am trying to describe. I make the space. I point at something I think is wrong, or broken, or worth looking at differently. And then I have to let go, and trust you, as the audience for this work, to do the rest. The resolution, if it comes, will be in your eyes. It is in the hope that this will happen that I turn up to work each morning.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evN6DIGPIJM?si=hVW5zZFZP4GUIPqI>

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*This series arose out of a conversation between Jacqueline and me on a very hot May Sunday morning, over several coffees. I owe a great deal to Jacqueline for helping me frame my thinking. As is true in many ways, I could not have done this without her.*