

# Wisdom in the Age of Information

## and the Importance of Storytelling in Making Sense of the World



We live in a world awash with information, but we seem to face a growing scarcity of wisdom. And what's worse, we confuse the two. We believe that having access to more information produces more knowledge, which results in more wisdom. But, if anything, the opposite is true — more and more information without the proper context and interpretation only muddles our understanding of the world rather than enriching it.

This barrage of readily available information has also created an environment where one of the worst social sins is to appear uninformed. Ours is a culture where it's enormously embarrassing not to have an opinion on something, and in order to seem informed, we form our so-called opinions hastily, based on fragmentary bits of information and superficial impressions rather than true understanding. "Knowledge," Emerson wrote, "is the knowing that we can not know." To grasp the importance of this, we first need to define these concepts as a ladder of understanding.

At its base is a piece of information, which simply tells us some basic facts about the world. Above that is knowledge — the understanding of how different bits of information fit together to reveal some truth about the world. Knowledge hinges on an act of correlation and interpretation. At the top is wisdom, which has a moral component — it is the application of information *worth remembering* and knowledge *that matters* to understanding not only how the world works, but also how it *should* work. And that requires a moral framework of what should and shouldn't matter, as well as an ideal of the world at its highest potentiality.

This is why the storyteller is all the more urgently valuable today.

A great storyteller — whether a journalist or editor or filmmaker or curator — helps people figure out not only what matters in the world, but also why it matters. A great storyteller dances up the ladder of understanding, from information to knowledge to wisdom. Through symbol, metaphor, and association, the storyteller helps us interpret information, integrate it with our existing knowledge, and transmute that into wisdom.

Susan Sontag **once said** that “reading sets standards.” Storytelling not only sets standards but, at its best, makes us want to live up to them, to transcend them.

A great story, then, is not about providing information, though it can certainly inform — a great story invites an expansion of understanding, a self-transcendence. More than that, it plants the seed for it and makes it impossible to do anything but grow a new understanding — of the world, of our place in it, of ourselves, of some subtle or monumental aspect of existence.

At a time when information is increasingly cheap and wisdom increasingly expensive, this gap is where the modern storyteller's value lives.

**Information** is having a library of books on shipbuilding. **Knowledge** applies that to building a ship. Access to the information — to the books — is a prerequisite for the knowledge, but not a guarantee of it.

Once you've built your ship, **wisdom** is what allows you to sail it without sinking, to protect it from the storm that creeps up from the horizon in the dead of the night, to

point it just so that the wind breathes life into its sails.

**Moral wisdom** helps you tell the difference between the right direction and the wrong direction in steering the ship.

A great storyteller is the kindly captain who sails her ship with tremendous wisdom and boundless courage; who points its nose in the direction of horizons and worlds chosen with unflinching idealism and integrity; who brings us somewhat closer to the answer, to our particular answer, to that grand question: *Why are we here?*

*Maria Popova*