The Dawning of the Age of Information

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IS103
History of Information
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The rise of the newspaper: technological & social roots
The second newspaper revolution
Defining “the news”
The rise (and fall) of "objectivity"
The Dawn of the Information Age

19th century:
The emergence of "literacy," "news," "information" and "objectivity" as social categories...
"The First Information Revolution"

Growth of common schools:
1800-1825: proportion of children in schools from 37 to 60%

Creation of the modern census

Modern postal service

Rise of penny newspapers, "dime novels," etc.

Introduction of telegraph, photography, railroad, steam-powered press...
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

“Causes” of the revolution:
- Technological developments
- Increased literacy -- a “nation of readers”
- A “natural” development
- The democratization of business and politics
- Political decisions
Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies

17th c. Press

18th c. Press

Times Printing Press -- 1814

The Sunday Times
Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies

- Times Printing Press -- 1814
- Foudrinier Machine, 1811
Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies

Times Printing Press -- 1814

Foudrinier Machine, 1811

Stephenson's Rocket, 1827
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

technological advances:
steam press,
paper-making machines
stereotypes (Firmin Didot)
rotary press:
    invented by Richard Hoe, 1844; capable of 20k impressions/hr

Foudrinier Machine, 1811
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

Further technological Advances:

Railroad, telegraph (from 1840's)
... not to mention shorthand

Pitman Shorthand 1837
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

But technology is as much the result as the cause:

“It may be more accurate to say that the penny press introduced steam power to American journalism than to say that steam brought forth the penny press” (Schudson)
"What would explain a rise in literacy... is an extension to more persons of the sense that they are actors in history."

Michael Schudson
William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

1819: Richard Carlile's *Republican* achieves greater circulation than the *Times* after Carlile is imprisoned for sedition.
The Second Newspaper Revolution

The *World*, the *Journal-American*: the birth of "yellow journalism"
The Second Newspaper Revolution

News as popular entertainment.

NY World achieves circulation of 600k, Journal 430k, etc.

Department stores & large retailers -- ratio of editorial material to ads goes from 70/30 to 50/50

Increased use of illustrations, cartoons, later chromolithographs...

Increasing political influence...

"You supply the pictures and I'll supply the war" W. R. Hearst.
The Birth of "Muckraking"

The connection to political Progressivism.

"In Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" you may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hand; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor.

Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing. ... But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck-rake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces for evil.

Theodore Roosevelt, 1906
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Cochran)

Ida Tarbell

Lincoln Steffens

McClure's Magazine
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Upton Sinclair

*The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair

*Doubleday, Page & Co.*

New York

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*The Jungle*

George Nash - Gail Kane

*All Star Features Co.*

*Original Motion Pictures* - Upton Sinclair's

*Powerful Story of Chicago's Meat Packers*

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*Postcard*
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Jacob Riis:
How the Other Half L.
establishing the news

truth
fact
news
speculation
comment
rumour
gossip
hoax
falsehood
establishing the news

What makes for news?

form
seriality
periodicity
voice
source
Defining “the News”

Stories about developments in politics, world affairs, business, sports, natural disasters, accidents, crime, arts, science...

A "natural hierarchy" of importance?
Localizing the News

“To my readers, an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.”

Hippolyte de Villemessant (editor of *le Figaro*, ca. 1850)

"One Englishman is a story. Ten Frenchmen is a story. One hundred Germans is a story. And nothing ever happens in Chile." Posting in a London newsroom.
News and the creation of imagined community

The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. - Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*

[Britain] has become a nation of readers. - Samuel Johnson, 1781
Defining "the News"

But of other features that make stories "newsworthy":

- plane crashes > winter furnace breakdowns
- incomes of rich criminals > incomes of poor criminals
- breakthroughs in science > breakthroughs in auto repair
- business news > labor news

(from Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News*)
Defining "the News"

Also:

- Famous people > unknown people (even when the famous people's acts are unrelated to the reasons for their fame)
- disappearing blondes > disappearing brunettes > disappearing women of color
Defining "the News"

2005 (Year of Katrina): Networks run 44 stories on Michael Jackson, 22 on poverty.
Easy to understand > hard to understand

Cf Chip Heath on spread of “Gore claims he invented the Internet”
19th c. forces leading to rise of objectivity

Weakening of partisanship.
1860 -- Gov’t Printing Office established
Reform movement, civil services, beginnings of progressivism

Enlarged markets for mass-circulation press/increasing dependence on advertising
Professionalization of journalism
The cult of science
Growth of wire services
"The reading public has reached a point of discrimination in the matter of its news. It not only demands that it shall be supplied promptly and fully, but the news must be accurate and absolutely without bias or coloring. The United Press is now abundantly able to supply this demand.... -- St. Paul News-Record (12/4/1894)

Its [The AP’s] members [i.e. subscribers] are scattered from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to the Gulf, and represent every possible shade of political belief, religious faith, and economic sympathy. It is obvious that the Associated Press can have no partisan nor factional bias, no religious affiliation, no capitalistic nor pro-labor trend. Its function is simply to furnish its members with a truthful, clean, comprehensive, non-partisan... report of the news in the world as expeditiously as is compatible with accuracy...
Frank B. Noyes, president of the Associated Press, 1913
Features of Objectivity

• Truthfulness/Facticity/Accuracy
  Reporting as "mirror," "window," "photograph." "A daily photograph of the day's events." (Charles Dana)

• Balance

• "naïve empiricism"
  --> facts are “real”

• Nonpartisanship
  "If people knew how I felt on an issue, I had failed in my mission" Walter Cronkite

• Detachment
  Objectivity prizes "information" over "story"
Features of Objectivity

• Truthfulness/Facticity/Accuracy
  Reporting as "mirror," "window," "photograph." "A daily photograph of the day's events." (Charles Dana)

• Balance: Presumes a common perspective
  Cf. Hallin on “spheres” of public discourse
“Naïve empiricism”: Facts are “in the world”
My business is merely to communicate facts. My instructions do not allow me to make any comments on the facts I communicate. ... My despatches are merely dry matters of facts and detail.
AP Washington bureau chief, 1866
Features of Objectivity

“Naïve empiricism”: Facts are “in the world”

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AP Washington bureau chief, 1866
Features of Objectivity

Form -- the inverted pyramid

This evening at about 9:30 p.m. at Ford's Theatre, the President while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Harris and Major Rathburn, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theatre.

The pistol ball entered the back of the President's head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal.

The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted, and is now dying.

About the same hour an assassin, whether the same or not, entered Mr. Seward’s apartment and under pretense of having prescription was shown to the Secretary’s sick chamber...

NY Herald, 4/15/1865
Reactions to Objectivity, 2

Realization of limits of “objectivity” Acknowledgement of public’s difficulty in digesting & interpreting “raw facts”

Cf Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 1920:

Men who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information. But where all news comes at second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths...
Reactions to Objectivity, 2

The rise of “interpretive journalism”
Birth of *Time* magazine, 1926; offers “intelligent criticism, representation, and evaluation of the men who hold offices of public trust.” Henry Luce

“Show me a man who thinks he’s objective, and I’ll show you a man who’s deceiving himself.” Henry Luce

Attacks on “objectivity” from the left
Arguments that objectivity is unattainable; the inevitability of subjectivity
Cf Harold Ickes on press bias in early 1940's:
"The American press is not free.... because of its own financial and economic tie-ups [instead of] what it should be, a free servant of a free democracy."
Cites absence of newspaper reports on dep't store elevator accidents, Gannett's opposition to public ownership of utilities, etc.
Members of the media argued that while personally liberal, they are professionally neutral. They argued their opinions do not matter because as professional journalists, they report what they observe without letting their opinions affect their judgment. But being a journalist is not like being a surveillance camera at an ATM, faithfully recording every scene for future playback. Journalists make subjective decisions every minute of their professional lives. They choose what to cover and what not to cover, which sources are credible and which are not, which quotes to use in a story and which to toss out.

Brent Bozell, Media Research Center
Is "Objectivity" an Illusion?

"I think we're coming to the end of the era of "objectivity" that has dominated journalism over this time. We need to define a new ethic that lends legitimacy to opinion, honestly disclosed and disciplined by some sense of propriety." Robert Bartley, WSJ

NB: "Biased" now more likely to be applied to "objective" news sources (e.g., CNN, NY Times) than to openly opinionated source (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Michael Moore)

"Objectivity" as collection of attitudes, ethical principles, stylistic guidelines, and professional practices, etc.
Properties of Information

Information is corpuscular (morselized), quantifiable, commoditized

Information is objective & transparent

The intelligence that came from afar ... possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to certification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' It is indispensable for information to sound plausible. (Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”)

Cf “Human information” vs. “human knowledge”

Information is public

"A letter from your old acquaintance, the housekeeper at the Grange," I answered.... She would gladly have gathered it up at this information, but Hareton beat her. (Wuthering Heights)

Cf “How much information is there in the world?”
The Phenomenology of Information

The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' It is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Faith in "information" follows from the form of the document itself.
The roots of “objectivity”

Continual concerns about the stability of "public opinion" --
Conception of the public sphere presupposes a certain model of how the discourse should be conducted. A sense that if people don't play by those rules, civil society (and democracy) is impossible.