



The Rise of Literacy and the Popular Press



History of Information 103
Geoff Nunberg

March 12, 2009

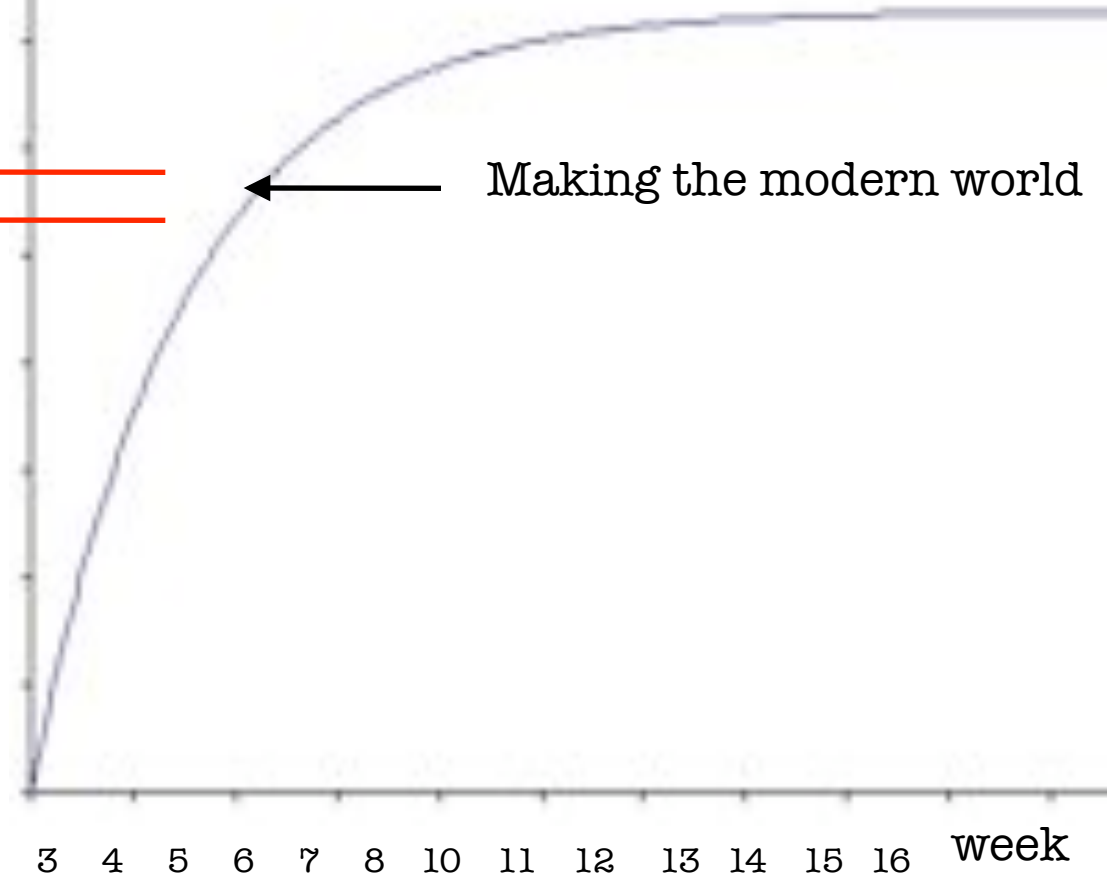




where we are



2009
1980
1950
1900
1800
1700
1600
1200
600
0
500
3000
5000
30,000
50,000





Itinerary: 3/12

The emergence of mass communications:
creating supply and demand

The historical rise of literacy

The two sides of literacy: empowerment and
social control

The emergence of "literacy" as a social good

Creating the institutions of literacy: schools
and libraries

The creation of the popular press:

sensationalism, muckracking, "news," and
"objectivity"



Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Literacy varies according to:

I. Levels of individual skill.

Cf Stone's five levels of literacy in pre-industrial Britain

Ability to sign name

Some reading, writing, use of numbers

Account keeping & preparation for professions

Some education in classics

University education

Historians tend to measure literacy as simple "alphabetism" -- why?



Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Literacy varies according to:

2. Range of social functions requiring literacy: What do people need literacy for?

"Functional literacy" defined in UNESCO report of 1956: "A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group"



"Functional Literacy"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?

How did you use your literacy today?



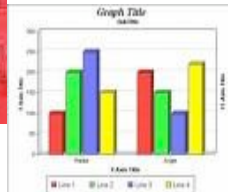
"Functional Literacy"

How did you use your literacy today?



"Functional Literacy"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?




Flight	Depart	Arrive	Stops	Travel Time (hrs:min)	Refundable	Non-refundable	Advanced Purchase	Baggage
1011	6:00am	7:00am	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1012	7:00am	8:00am	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1013	8:00am	9:00am	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1014	9:00am	10:00am	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1015	10:00am	11:00am	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1016	11:00am	12:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1017	12:00pm	1:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1018	1:00pm	2:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1019	2:00pm	3:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1020	3:00pm	4:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1021	4:00pm	5:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1022	5:00pm	6:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1023	6:00pm	7:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1024	7:00pm	8:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1025	8:00pm	9:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag
1026	9:00pm	10:00pm	0	1:00	✓	✗	7 days	1 bag





Individual and Group Literacy

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

3. Is literacy individual or group achievement?

Cf role of public readers, letter writers, etc.







Factors influencing the growth of literacy (Stone)

Social stratification

Job opportunity

Religion

Social control

Demographic patterns

Economic organization

Political institutions



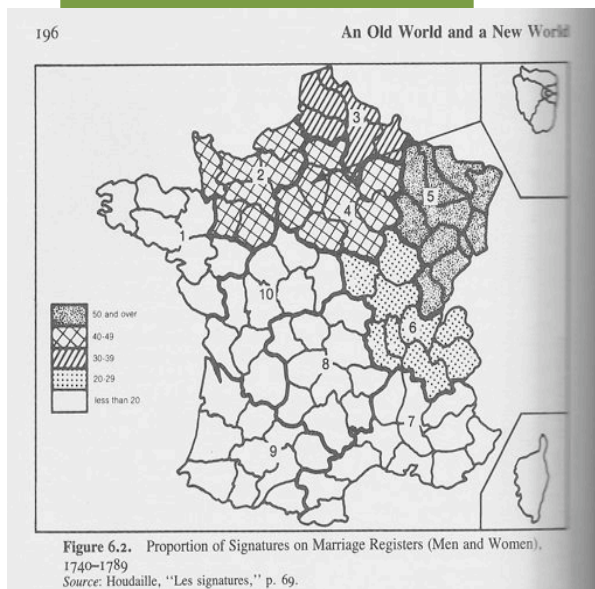
Social and Religious Prerequisites for literacy

Growth in literacy

Protestant > Catholic, North > South

Literacy rates highest in Scotland, Sweden, New England, Wales...

But there is also a relatively high literacy rate in Catholic areas of Northern Europe (Bavaria, Rhineland), which tended to be wealthier with more commercial development and more towns.



"une France double"

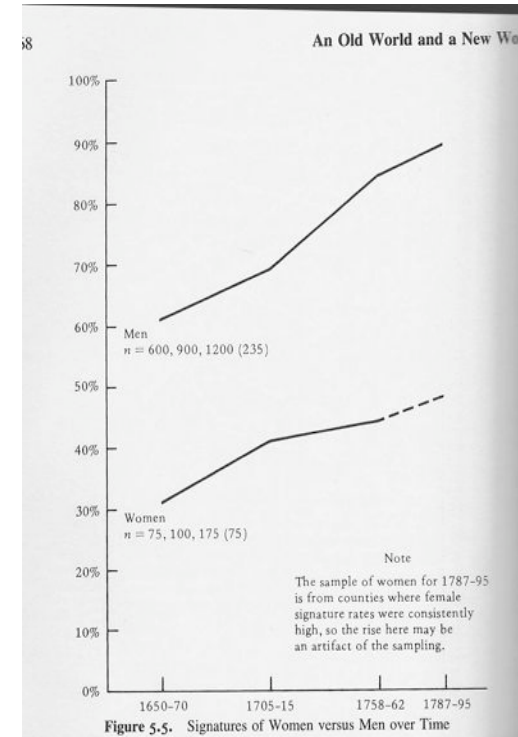
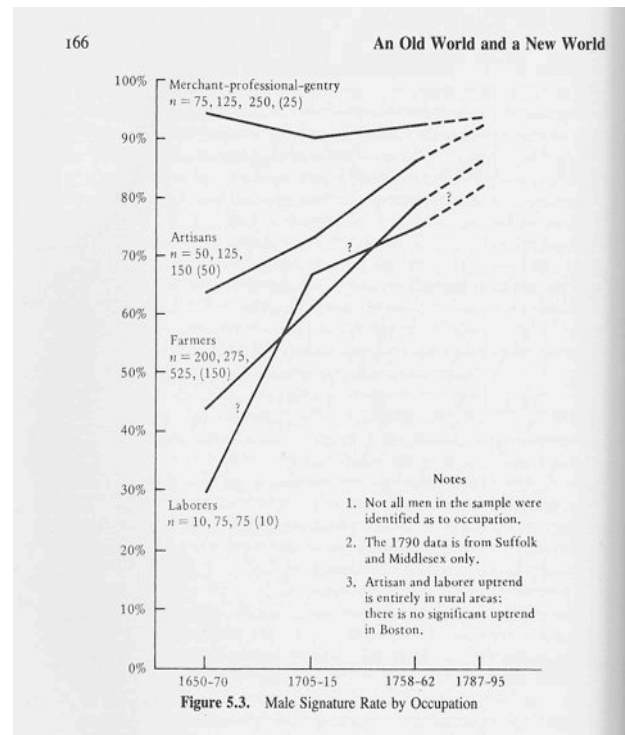


Social Prerequisites for Literacy, 2

Growth of literacy

Urban > rural

Men > women





Literacy and Education

Education should be a vehicle for producing literate society per societal requirements...

But often fails to achieve these goals for historical, symbolic, class reasons



Literacy and Social Control

Conflicting views of literacy:

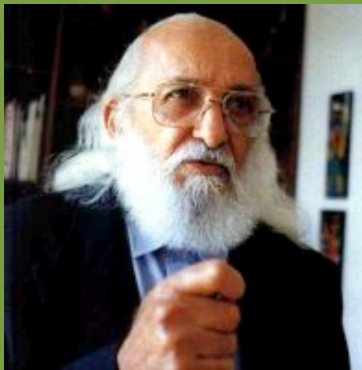
Instrument of increased political consciousness,
which can instill "dangerous ideas"

Too much education "would make everyone unfit to follow the plough." Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, 1857

"Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition, and timidity [timorousness] are the weapons which our oppressors have used most effectively in the past.

-- *Palladium of Labor*, 1873

Cf Paulo Freire on literacy as the "pedagogy of the oppressed" and a means for disrupting the "culture of silence.





Seditious Uses of Literacy in the Renaissance... and now



The "talking statue" in the Piazza del Pasquino, Rome, with posted *pasquili* ("pasquinades")



Rise of the Radical Press



Cobbett

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 Republican.

No. 2, Vol. I.] LONDON, FRIDAY, SEPT. 3, 1819. [PRICE 2d.





Lector in
Key West, 1920's

"Group" Literacy and Political Consciousness



Cf *lectores* in Cuban cigar factories:

Followed creation of cigar-makers' union in 1857; *lector* paid for by workers (85% illiteracy rate in Cuba at the time)

Readings included novels & histories, also newspapers (esp. *La Aurora*, political paper est. for cigar makers)

1866: Political Governor of Cuba issues edict making it illegal "to distract the workers of the tobacco shows.... with the reading of books and newspapers, or with discussions foreign to the work in which they are engaged."





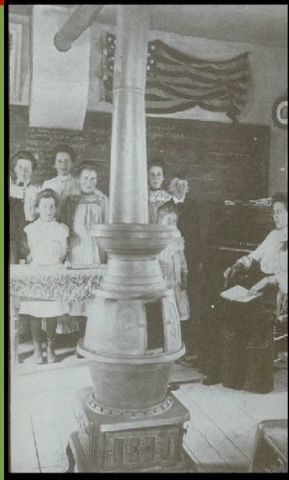
The Lone R

"Reading will help to mend people's morals, but writing is not necessary." Jonas Hanway

"It is not proposed that the children of the poor be taught to write and cypher." Anglican National Society for fostering education.



The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"Perhaps [the teaching of orthography] is best done by Pairing the Scholars, two of those nearest equal in their Spelling to be put together; let these strive for victory each propounding ten words each day for the other to be spelt. He that spells truly most of the other's Words; he that is Victor most Days in a Month, to obtain a prize, a pretty neat Book of some Kind useful in their future Studies."

B. Franklin, 1751



The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

Popularity of the spelling bee:

"Thar's a new game down in Frisco, that ez far ez I can see
Beats euchre, poker, and van-toon, they calls the "Spellin' Bee."
...O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.
You wants to know the rest, my dears? Thet's all! In me you see
The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin' Bee!"

--Bret Harte, "The Spelling Bee at Angels"

1875: 4000 attend spelling bee at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia.





The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"Spelling was my forte, as is natural for a child of tenacious memory and no judgment." Horace Greeley, of his childhood around 1820

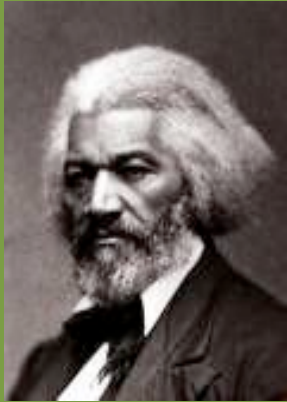


Winning words from Scripps National Spelling Bee in decade following 1925: *promiscuous*, *intelligible*, *fracas*, *gladiolus*, *knack*.

Winning words in recent Bees: *xanthosis*, *vivisepture*, *euonym*, *opsimath*, *succedaneum*, and *prospicience*.



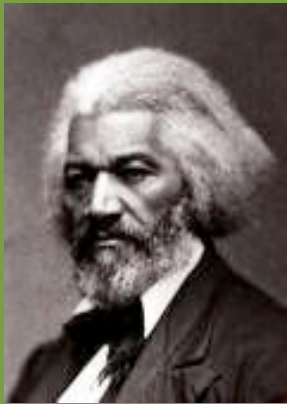
The "dangers" of black literacy



.Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read...*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*



Literacy & Slavery

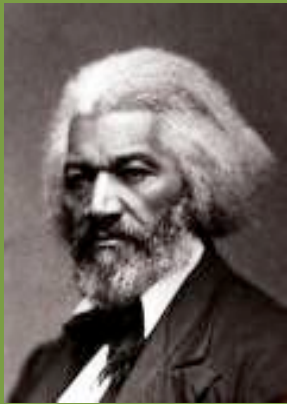


"If you give a n____ an inch, he will take an ell. A n____ should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n____ in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that n____ (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master."

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845



Literacy & Slavery



"These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845



Literacy as an instrument of "moral improvement" and social control



Literacy also regarded as instrument of social control, which guarantees political stability and workers' tractability.

"The more [the poor] are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among the ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders."

Adam Smith

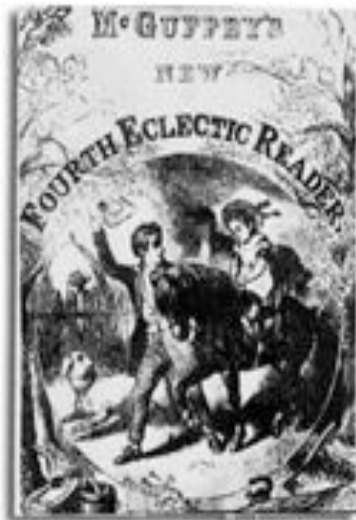




Literacy and Social Control, cont.



"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.



Organisations use literacy as a proxy for cooperativeness and 'trainability' among recruits. Once such a belief is institutionalised in selection procedures, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and the organisation is never confronted with contradictory instances. Kenneth Levine, *The Social Context of Literacy*, 1986



“The Uplifting of the American Negro”

The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

Edward Alsworth Ross in the *Am. Jnl. Of Sociology*, 1898



The achievement of black literacy

Rise in black literacy after Civil War: from 5-10% to ca. 60% by 1870

Literacy as a "coveted possession"





The triumph of "literacy" in late 19th-America

Introduction of compulsory universal schooling

Increase in immigration, urban in-migration

Introduction of women into the workforce

Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900

Rise of both radical politics and of political parties and "boss" system makes both conservatives and reformers eager to create literate public.

Literacy seen as a source of individual social advancement and societal development. Literacy rates become an indicator of modernity.



Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy

I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society.

Egberton Ryerson, Chief Superintendant of Education for Upper Canada, 1849



Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy?



But assumptions about literacy and social advancement are not always justified.

"The literate English farm labourer of the late eighteenth century fared no better (and possibly even worse, due to the prejudices of his employer) than his illiterate companion." Laurence Stone



In 19th-c. Canadian cities, "Only rarely was the achievement of literacy [among workers] sufficient to counter the depressing effects of inherited characteristics, of ethnicity, race, and sex. The process of stratification, with its basis in rigid social inequality, ordered the illiterates as it did those who were educated." Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth*





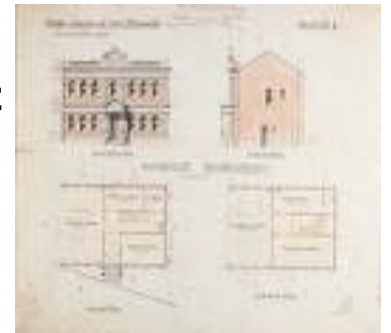
The Growth of Public Libraries



Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731); Town libraries (Boston, 1848; NY, 1849)

UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Later: Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK





Functions of the Library: Political Objectives

Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.



[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator....As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied.

J. P. Quincy, 1876



Reservations about Carnegie Libraries

Figure 2. "Forbidden Fruit" an 1885 engraving after a painting by A. Toulmouche



Concerns about popularity of "immoral fiction" and availability of seditious works

"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928





The Rise of the Popular Press



"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.



Rise of the Penny Newspaper



James Gordon
Bennett

“Causes” of the revolution:

Technological developments

Increased literacy -- a “nation of readers”

The democratization of business and politics

Policy decisions



NY Herald, 1842



Rise of the Penny Newspaper



technological advances:

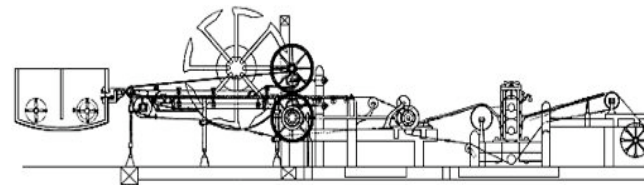
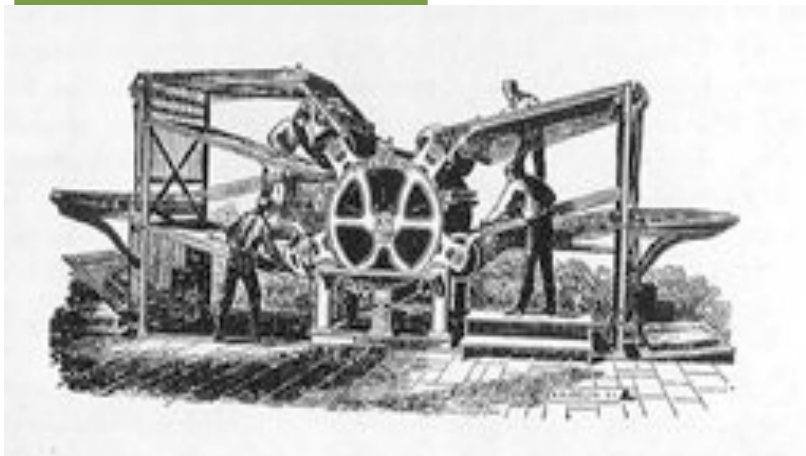
steam press,

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

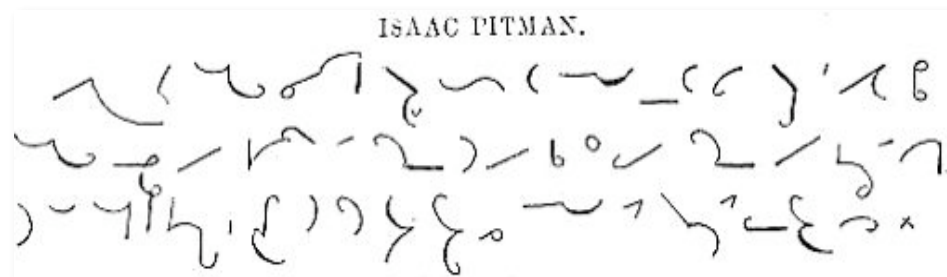


Stephenson's
Rocket, 1827

Further technological Advances:

Railroad, telegraph (from 1840's)

... not to mention shorthand



Pitman Shorthand 1837



The Second Newspaper Revolution

The *World*, the *Journal-American*; the birth of "yellow journalism"



Joseph Pulitzer



Randolph Hearst

The Second Newspaper Revolution



Increasing political influence...

"You supply the pictures and I'll supply the war" W. R. Hearst.

Does Our Flag Protect Women? Indignities Practiced by Spanish Officials on Board American Vessels. Refined Young Women Stripped and Searched by Brutal Spaniards While Under Our Flag

NY Journal, 2/12/1897



Richard Harding Davis



The Birth of "Muckraking"



Nellie Bly
(Elizabeth Cochran)



Ida Tarbell



Lincoln Steffens





The Birth of "Muckraking"



Upton Sinclair





The Birth of "Muckraking"



Jacob Riis:
How the Other Half Lives



The “higher” journalism



1896: Adolph Ochs takes over the NY Times

Stresses “decency,” reform, “respectability,”
“information” journalism

Circulation goes from 9000 to 350,000 in 1920



Defining the "News"



Defining "the News": Range of Content



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

Reviews, weather, columns,
announcements,

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. (Apocryphal?)



Prioritizing "the News"

But of other features that make stories
"newsworthy":

plane crashes > winter furnace breakdowns

crimes 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



51





The Rise of Objectivity



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 -- creation of journalism courses & schools

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



The truth of photographs



While we give [sunlight] credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even if he could detect it.

The Daguerrotypist Holgrave, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*, 1851

What he [the camera] saw was faithfully reported, exact, and without blemish.

Am. Photographer James F. Ryder in 1902, recalling his first camera from the 1850's



The Rise of Objectivity

Schudson: Objectivity as a conscious norm

Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone.

Detachment: privileges "information" over "story"

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



The Rise of Objectivity



Schudson: Objectivity as a conscious norm

Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy.

Balance

According to the objectivity norm, the journalist's job consists of reporting something called 'news' without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way."

Neutrality



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Neutrality/nonpartisanship:

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



The Objective Voice

Detachment: Creation of the “degree zero” voice

Reporters were to report the news as it happened, like machines, without prejudice, color, and without style; all alike. Humor or any sign of personality in our reports was caught, rebuked, and suppressed.

Lincoln Steffens on his years on the *Post*



Features of Objectivity



Edwin Stanton

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.

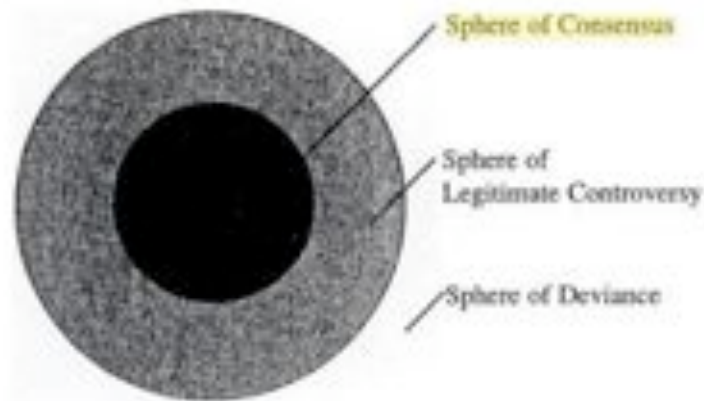
About the same hour an assassin, whether the same or not, entered Mr. Seward's apartment and under pretense of having a prescription was shown to the Secretary's sick chamber...

NY Herald, 4/15/1865



Features of Objectivity

Balance etc. presume a common perspective
Cf. Hallin on “spheres” of public discourse



Shifting status: slavery, votes for women, gay marriage