The Rise of the Mass-Circulation Press

History of Information i103
Geoff Nunberg
March 3, 2011
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 future of literacy

The creation of the popular press:
- sensationalism, muckracking, and "news"
Where We Are
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
"The First Information Revolution"

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

"the tawdry novels which flare in the bookshelves of our railway stations, and which seem designed... for people with low standards of life." Matthew Arnold, 1880
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

"Causes" of the revolution:
- Technological developments
- Increased literacy -- a “nation of readers”
- The democratization of business and politics

James Gordon Bennett

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

Further technological Advances:

Railroad, telegraph (from 1840's)

... not to mention shorthand

Stephenson's Rocket, 1827

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

[Image of The Jungle book cover and poster]
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?
“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 cf 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
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
Explanations of the Rise of Objectivity

Now the desideratum of the Telegraph—the great question most important to all—is this: How can the greatest amount of intelligence be communicated in the fewest words? Is not this the very question which has been for centuries theoretically proposed by scholars as the ultimatum of language. Language is but the medium of thought, which flies as rapidly and acts as instantaneously as the invisible element which flashes along the Telegraphic wire. The more closely, then, that it follows the operation of thought, the more perfectly does it perform its office. Every useless ornament, every added grace which is not the very extreme of simplicity, is but a troublesome encumbrance.

Conrad Swackhamer, "Influence of the Telegraph Upon Literature," 1844
"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
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Schudson: But why wasn't newspaper prose "lean and telegraphic" or nonpartisan?
Look rather to changing status of reporters, cult of science, progressive reforms, e.t.
Norms of "objectivity" don't emerge until after WWI.

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Objectivity as a Conscious Norm

Schudson: Objectivity as a conscious norm

"The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy. 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."
What makes for "objectivity"?

Schudson: Objectivity as a conscious norm

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Facticity: reporting as "mirror, photograph." A daily photograph of the day's events." (Charles Dana)
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
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Neutrality/nonpartisanship:

"If people knew how I felt on an issue, I had failed in my mission" Walter Cronkite
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
On an autumn afternoon of 1919 a hatless man with a slight limp might have been observed ascending the gentle, broad acclivity of Riceyman Steps, which lead from King’s Cross Road up to Riceyman Square, in the great metropolitan industrial district of Clerkenwell. He was rather less than stout and rather more than slim. His thin hair had begun to turn from black to grey, but his complexion was still fairly good, and the rich, very red lips, under a small greyish moustache and over a short, pointed beard, were quite remarkable in their suggestion of vitality. The brown eyes seemed a little small; they peered at near objects. As to his age, an experienced and cautious observer of mankind, without previous knowledge of this man, would have said no more than that he must be past forty.

*Arnold Bennett, Riceyman Steps*
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
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What calls for objectivity – and what doesn't?

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

Shifting status: slavery, votes for women, gay marriage
Objectivity: An Evolving Ethos
Objectivity: An Evolving Ethos
The Rise of “Propaganda”

Propaganda (OED) (More fully, Congregation or College of the Propaganda.) A committee of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church having the care and oversight of foreign missions, founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV.

"Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning... Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmic aura.” Will Irwin, Propaganda and the News

1922: Encyclopedia Britannica first includes propaganda as entry
States begin to take a direct role in creating & diffusing pro-government views.
The Rise of "Propaganda"
The rise of propaganda: 1914-1917

WWI: Creel Committee, “4-minute men,” etc.
75,000 speakers to give short speeches & lantern-slide presentations
75 million booklets distributed, in multiple languages

“We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was educational and informative throughout. No other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts.” George Creel
Rise of publicists, press services.

“The development of the modern publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts... the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties.” Walter Lippman, Public Opinion, 1923

Connection between propaganda, PR, & advertising (cf other languages)

Increasing suspicion of propaganda:

1939 poll shows 40 percent of Americans blame propaganda for the US entry into the First World War.
After the War: The birth of the press agent

Rise of publicists, press services.

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.

Edward Bernays, 1928

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Reactions to Objectivity

Emergence of the daily columnist
Attacks on “objectivity” from the left
Arguments that objectivity is unattainable; the inevitability of subjectivity

The question is not whether the news shall be unprejudiced but whose prejudices shall color the news. Morris Ernst, 1937
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...
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

“a language in which nobody could tell the truth” -- Marshall McLuhan on *Time*-style
The Shifting Meaning of "Bias"

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.
"I am distressed to note that Governor Adlai Stevenson has participated since the election in a subtle but nevertheless persistent misrepresentation of the fairness and truthfulness of the American newspapers in reporting public events. .. The new Marxian line of propaganda no longer is centering on Wall Streeters but the American press… [undermining] public confidence in the newspapers."  Alf Landon, Jan 8, 1953
The Shifting Meaning of "Bias"

1969 WSJ discounts Agnew's charge of media conspiracy to discredit Nixon administration; cites "unconscious slant" introduced by the "prevailing liberal tendencies of the national media."

Cf Albert H. Hastorf and Hadley Cantrill on 1951 Princeton/Dartmouth game: "They Saw a Game," 1954; selective perception

Changing meanings of "bias," "prejudice," etc. (not in OED)
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
Recent Attacks on Objectivity, cont.

Attacks gather strength in 1990’s
Rise in mentions of "liberal media bias"; outnumber mentions of "conservative media bias" by more than 20 to 1 (proportion rises to 30 to 1 by 2006).

“Bias” taken as matter of undisputed fact:
WSJ, 2002: media bias is "one of the facts of life so long obvious they would seem to be beyond dispute."
Cf Also Bernard Goldberg, in Bias: ”The old argument that the networks and other 'media elites' have a liberal bias is so blatantly true that it's hardly worth discussing anymore”
Cf Fox slogan “Fair and Balanced” -- implications of advertising this claim; where is "objectivity"?
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

“Anyone listening to Rush Limbaugh knows that what he is saying is his own opinion. But people who listen to the news on ABC, CBS, or NBC may imagine that they are getting the facts, not just those facts which fit the ideology of the media, with the media's spin.” Thomas Sowell.

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" and the rise of the blog
2002 (or so) -- political blogs become a major force in political discourse

Unlike columnists, bloggers are (usually) detached from affiliations with newspapers or news institutions. Rather, exist in network of links...

Most (political) blogs are explicitly partisan.

Blogs function to mediate between “news sources” and “public opinion” -- perform interpretive function (despite occasional scoops)

Cf Blog “voice”: the new syntax of public(?) discourse.
Ruptured Discourses

Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"
Bias, Balance, and Blogs

Does heterogeneity of the blogosphere provide a kind of “collaborative filtering” of political opinion?

Do blogs reinforce or reduce fragmentation of public sphere, or are they neutral?

Can blogs survive mainstreaming?

“Blogs, which sprang up to sass the establishment, have been overrun by the establishment. In a lame attempt to be hip, pols are posting soggy, foggy, bloggy musings on the Internet — spewing out canned meanderings in a genre invented by unstructured exhibitionists.” — Maureen Dowd

Will social media replace free-standing blogs?