Information and Objectivity

Concepts of Information i218
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Agenda

The phenomenology of "information" as a historical category
  The spatialization of discourse
The historical background – rise of the press
  The notion of "news"
The rise (and fall) of "objectivity"
The Historical Nature of Information
The Dawn of the Information Age

19th century:
The emergence of "literacy," "news," "information" and "objectivity" as value-laden social categories…
What makes something "information"?

The deceptive abstraction of definitions:

3. The mutual relation of the constituent parts or elements of a whole as determining its peculiar nature or character.
What makes something "information"?

The deceptive abstraction of definitions:

**structure** 3. The mutual relation of the constituent parts or elements of a whole as determining its peculiar nature or character.

*The structure of society...is the same in all those settlements.*

*The interior part of the drop had a structure similar to that of fluid glass.*

*Men..became conscious of new fibre in their moral structure.*
What makes something "information"?

**information** 3. a Knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event; that of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news. spec. contrasted with data.

*C1450* Ferthere to geve the Enformacioun, Of mustard whyte the seed is profitable.

*1727* SWIFT Gulliver III. ii, It was necessary to give the reader this information.

*1895* If the underwriters wanted to know more, they ought to have asked for information.

*1970* In administrative data processing, a distinction is sometimes made between data and information by calling raw facts in great quantity ‘data’, and using the word ‘information’ for highly concentrated and improved data derived from the raw facts.
What creates the impression of "information"?

What properties do we implicitly ascribe to a representation or communication when we describe it as "information"?

Why did this conception arise when it did?
What makes something count as "information"?

Medium: "information" usually presumes a fixed medium of storage or transmission.

Setting: Information" belongs to public, commercial, or institutional life.

Cf "free exchange of information"…

"objectivity"/transferability: information is "in the world," independent of its source or creator

Compare "medical information" with "medical knowledge"

Corpuscularity (like sand or succotash)

Measurability
What makes something "information"?

... The assumption that the production of "informed" public consciousness was to be achieved chiefly through the production and dissemination of "objective" propositional content — the "information," that is, on whose free exchange the functioning of democratic society, the free marketplace, and the rest are routinely held to depend.
The Institutional Background

Emergence of the reference work and natural history & art museums; travel guides, government reports; printed forms, work rules, and schedules.

Also: libraries, department stores, fiat money.

"objective" journalism; the rise of science;
"The ideal of objectivity attempts to eliminate the mediating presence of the observer." Datson & Galison
What makes something "information"?

The impression of "information" arises out of the commodification of content.

The impression of "information" inheres in the form of its presentation.

The intelligence that came from afar — whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition — 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 Boundedness of Information

In its public (abstract) sense, information implies a bounded domain of representation: cf., "medical information doubles every X years"

Domain is both topological and metrical:

Topological: Inside/outside; public/private; scene/obscene – permits "comprehensive" enumeration of words, news items, etc. ("all the news"). Makes exclusions significant.
Material correlates of boundedness

Hold the English language in your two hands...

...and you possess the proven key to knowledge, enjoyment, and success!
Material correlates of boundedness

Library of the Escorial, 1543

E-L. Boulée, plan for the Bibliothèque du Roi, 1785

Labrouste, Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève, 1851
Material correlates of boundedness

Smirke, British Museum Reading Room, 1851

Labrouste, Bibliothèque Nationale 1868

Pelz/Casey Reading Room, LOC, ca 1898

Asplund, Stockholm City Library, 1928
Modeling Discourse Space, The Form of Collections

D. Perrault, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1994
Metrical Space

Nature of diffusion supports spatialization into center/periphery.

That vast aggregate of words and phrases which constitutes the Vocabulary of English-speaking men presents... the aspect of one of those nebulous masses familiar to the astronomer, in which a clear and unmistakable nucleus shades off on all sides, through zones of decreasing brightness, to a dim marginal film that seems to end nowhere, but to lose itself imperceptibly in the surrounding darkness.…

James Murray, "General Explanation" to the OED
The Spatialization of Discourse

Canonicity: All elements of all subdomains are ordered with regard to "centrality" of membership

- **words**: civet > panther > cat
- **authors**: Michael Crichton > John Updike > Herman Melville
- **news events**: rescued cat > school budget vote > earthquake

Also: tourist attractions (travel guides), artists (national collections), etc.
The Spatialization of Discourse

Canonicity permits essentialist abridgement. "If the lexicon of a language is indeed something like that of a circle, then… if one moves away from the center in concentric circles, the result should be a faithful image of the total lexicon." Henri Béjoint, *Tradition and Innovation in English Dictionaries*, 1992

Men of good will have extracted the substance of a thousand volumes and passed it in its entirety into a single small duodecimo, a bit like skillful chemists who press out the essence of flowers to concentrate it in a phial while throwing the dregs away." Louis-Sebastian Mercier, *L'An 2440*, 1771
The Logic of Literary Fame

Accessibility → Diffusion → Reputation → Merit

Evidential

Causal
Cf George Campbell, Philosophy of Rhetoric, 1776: “it is of importance to have some certain, steady, and well-known standard to recur to, a standard which every one hath access to canvass and examine. And this can be no other than authors of reputation…. I choose to name them authors of reputation, rather than good authors, for two reasons: first, because it is more strictly conformable to the truth of the case. It is solely the esteem of the public, and not their intrinsic merit (though these two go generally together), which raises them to this distinction, and stamps a value on their language.”
Campbell: Secondly, this character is more definitive than the other, and therefore more extensively intelligible. Between two or more authors, different readers will differ exceedingly, as to the preference in point of merit, who agree perfectly as to the respective places they hold in the favour of the public.
The Historical Background: Objectivity and the Modern 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.

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”
- The democratization of business and politics
- Policy decisions
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
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” (Michael Schudson)
The Rise of Literacy

Growth in literacy

Urban > rural
Men > women

Figure 5.3. Male Signature Rate by Occupation
Growing civic importance attached to literacy; literacy rates as indices of development, etc.

"What would explain a rise in literacy... is an extension to more persons of the sense that they are actors in history."

Michael Schudson
The Second Newspaper Revolution

News as popular entertainment.

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

Department stores & large retailers -- ratio of editorial content 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.

**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

McCLURE'S MAGAZINE
FOR JANUARY
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Upton Sinclair
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Jacob Riis: 
How the Other Half Lives
1896: Adolph Ochs takes over the NY Times

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

Circulation goes from 9000 to 350,000 in 1920
Information and "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 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
Easy to understand > hard to understand

Cf Chip Heath on spread of “Gore claims he invented the Internet” vs "Social Security lockbox"
The Rise of Objectivity
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."
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)
1839: In truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear -- but the closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more accurate truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.

E.A. Poe
The Truth of photographs

- 1839: In photograph of rue du Temple, Daguerre inadvertently makes first photograph of a person
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. Photgrapher James F. Ryder in 1902, recalling his first camera from the 1850’s
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
The Rise of Objectivity

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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
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 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
Schudson: "From the perspective of the local news institution, the triumphs and defeats of the local team are examined from a stance that presumes enthusiastic backing of the team. The home team is within what Daniel Hallin has called the ‘sphere of consensus’ in journalism, a domain in which the rules of objective reporting do not hold."
The giant scoreboard above them said it all: **Warriors** 133, Thunder 120. In his second attempt at securing his 1,300th career victory, Nelson joined all-time winningest coach Lenny Wilkens as the only NBA pair to reach the milestone mark on Saturday.

And he did it with classic Nellie-ball.

Lots of offense, very little defense.

The Warriors shot a season-high 56.3 percent at Oracle Arena as Stephen Jackson led seven teammates in double-digits with 26 points.

It was just enough firepower to overcome a layup and dunk parade by the Thunders' impressive core of Kevin Durant, Jeff Green and Russell Westbrook - who combined for 90 points - and an astounding 44-27 rebounding deficit.

"How you win a game in the NBA and get 27 rebounds? Tough to do," said Nelson, who trails Wilkens on the all-time list by 32 wins. "But we found a way." Saturday's win also marked the Warriors' 20th of the season, though, as Nelson inferred, it wasn't exactly one for the ages.
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
We said that the tendency of language is invariably toward the standard of perfection. Strange as the assertion may seem, we declare that the Telegraph will contribute directly to the attainment of that end wherever it is used. 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
Explanations of the Rise of Objectivity

Schudson: But why wasn't newspaper prose "lean and telegraphic" or nonpartisan?
Look rather to changing status of reporters, cult of science, progressive reforms, etc. Norms of "objectivity" don't emerge until after WWI.

"In 1922–23, the American Society of Newspaper Editors… adopted a Code of Ethics or ‘Canons of Journalism’ that included a principle of ‘Sincerity, Truthfulness, Accuracy’ and another of ‘Impartiality,’ the latter including the declaration, ‘News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind’"
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"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
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.
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The Rise of “Propaganda”

Average Annual Frequency of “Propaganda” and “Orwellian” in *The New York Times*, by Decade
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
After the War: The birth of the press agent

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

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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
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" and the rise of the blog