



“Reality’ is one of
the few words that
mean nothing
without quotes.”
V. Nabokov

Information and Objectivity

Concepts of Information i218
Geoff Nunberg

Feb. 22, 2011



Agenda

The Emergence of "objective" Information

The emergence of objectivity

Objectivity and the photograph

The historical background – rise of the press

 The notion of "news"

The rise (and fall) of "objectivity"



The Emergence of "Objective" Information



The Dawn of the Information Age

19th century:

The emergence of "literacy," "news," "information" and "objectivity" as value-laden social categories...



The features of abstract information (19th. C)

"Information" acquires a civic importance. Cf "informed voter," "informed citizen," etc.

"Every Woman an Informed Voter" By Indiana League of Women Voters 1920

Many thousand honest, but not well-informed voters, who supported Mr. Buchanan under the delusive impression that he would favor the cause of free Kansas, will soon learn their mistake. 1855

The notion that the free exchange of information is vital to a democracy is a longstanding principle of the First Amendment. 1878

If it is the object of the government.... to dispose of [public documents] in such a manner as to make the community acquainted with its doings, it cannot better effect this object than by making a large use of public libraries for the free dissemination of information. 1881



The features of abstract information (19th. C)

"Informed opinion" (OED 1897):

As the inquiries necessary to be made, to enable the board to give a **well-informed opinion** on this important subject, must branch out into a variety of matter we have directed that they mould be arranged under separate heads. Edmund Burke, 1786

A substantial body of **informed opinion** considers the continuous cab signal more useful as a safety device than the train-control system itself. 1845

Even in those countries, however, **informed opinion** is by no means unanimously monometallist. 1892



The features of abstract information (19th. C)

"Information" is increasingly associated with institutional/scientific/bureaucratic/journalistic contexts.

"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*, 1847

Your search - "the information that i love you" OR "the information that he loves me" OR "the information that you love her" OR "the information that he loves her" - did not match any documents.



The features of abstract information (19th. C)

Information is "objective" – in theory:

- presents same aspect to everyone/context-independent

- has same significance to every observer

- Is framed in perspective-free way ("aperspectival" objectivity; "the view from nowhere")

- Distinct from statements of "values"



The emergence of objectivity



Stirrings of objectivity

Late 18th –early 19th (but word is much older in distinct sense)

"A thing is said to exist OBJECTIVELY, objectivité, when it exists no otherwise than in being known; or in being an object of mind." Chambers Cyclopaedia, 1728

Drew on preexisting practices: eg. disinterestedness, impartiality in law



Pinning "objectivity" down

Most accounts of objectivity – philosophical, sociological, political -- address it as a concept. Whether understood as the view from nowhere or algorithmic rule following, whether praised as the soul of scientific integrity or blamed as soulless detachment from all that is human, objectivity is assumed to be abstract, timeless, and monolithic. But if it is a pure concept, it is less like a bronze sculpture cast from a single mold than like some improvised contraption soldered together out of mismatched parts of bicycles, alarm clocks, and steam pipes.

Lorraine Gaston & Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* (2007) P. 51



Varieties of objectivity

As a feature of the world ("objective reality")

What is there independent of human observations; Kant's *Ding an sich*

As a feature of representations of/knowledge of the world. ("objective descriptions")

Corresponding to the objective world ("true to nature")

Independent of observer's values or perspective.

Uniform for all observers at all times.

Mechanically testable or verifiable.

"Fair and balanced"

Dispassionate

Objectivity as a descriptive and prescriptive concept



The reach of "objectivity"

Domains of application of "objectivity"

Epistemology/philosophy of science

Mathematics & Physical Sciences

Social Sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*

Institutional & bureaucratic contexts ("objective admissions standards")

Artistic representations (novelistic realism/ "objective point of view")

Journalism & public discourse ("objective reporting")

Ordinary speech. ("I'm going to try to be objective")

But these are connected...



(at least) three understandings of objectivity

Absolute/metaphysical objectivity: representing the world-as-it-is.

Disciplinary/consensual objectivity: guaranteed by community operating under certain norms and standards.

"Mechanical" objectivity; "following rules"/"objective criteria"



The roots of objectivity



Potential Sources of "objectivity"

The rise of modern science

Statistics & quantitative methods, new tools of observation

Professionalization, "scientific communities," appearance of (modern) journals

Positivism and utilitarianism

Technological advances: photography

Rationalizing and operationalizing the modern state, rhetoric of mechanical rule-following (PD will discuss)

Political & democratic reforms: the need for "informed citizenry";

Literacy as a social good: universal schooling, public libraries.

Modern journalism



"objectivity" in the air..



Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. ... With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all supposititious, non-existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind-no, sir !



The truth of photographs



1839: In truth, the Daguerreotypic 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





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.

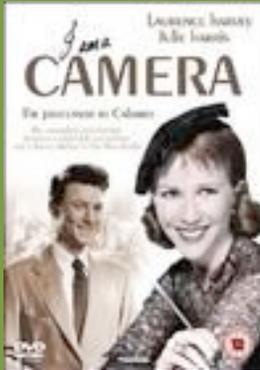
The Daguerrotypist Holgrave, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*, 1851

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 photograph as a model for journalistic objectivity



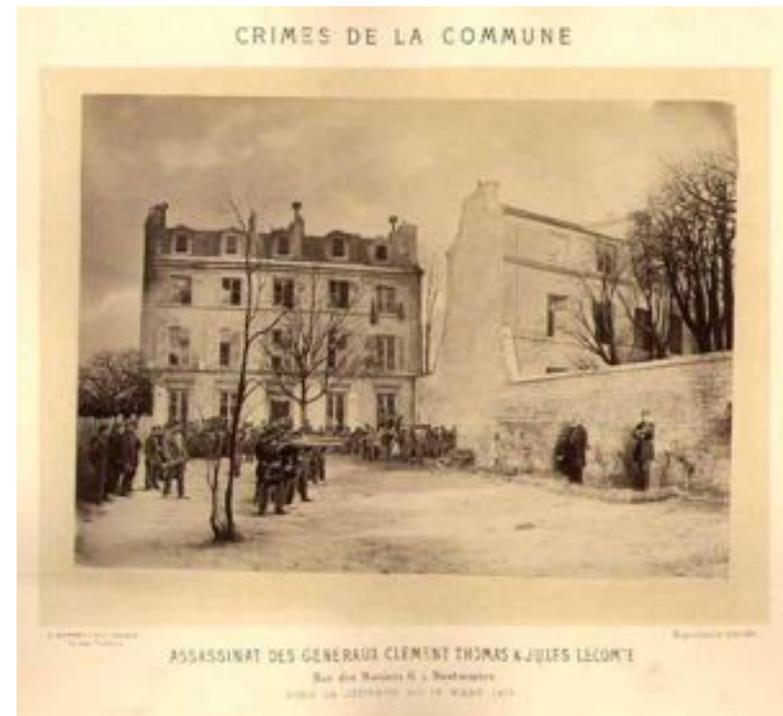
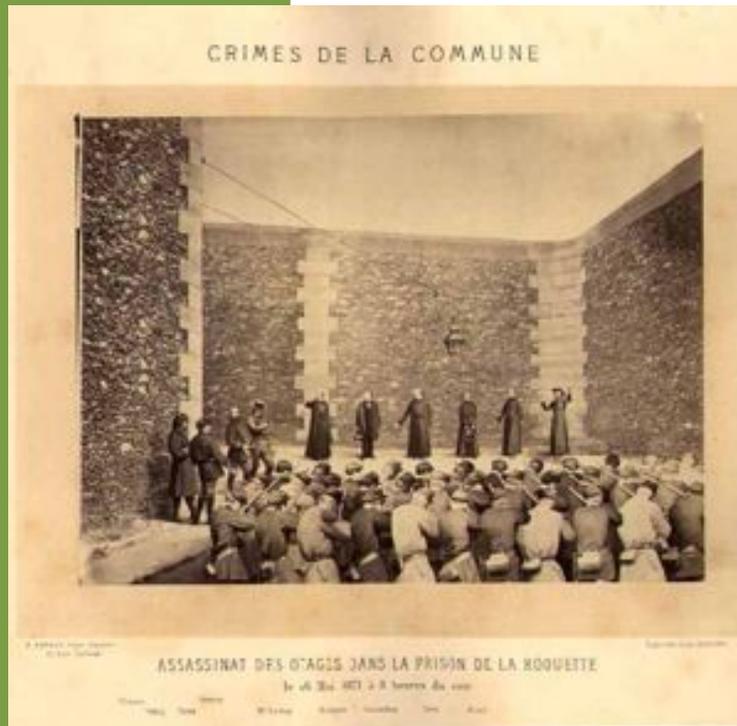
The news as “A daily photograph of the day's events.” (Charles Dana)

The *New York Herald* is now the representative of American manners, of American thought. It is the daily daguerreotype of the heart and soul of the model republic. It delineates with faithfulness the American character in all its rapid changes and ever varying hues. *London Times*, 1848



Doctoring the Truth

1871: Paris Commune: Photographs of executions by communards are doctored to change identity of victims.





Doctoring the Truth



“The Valley of Death,” photographs by Roger Fenton, April 4, 1855



Doctoring the Truth

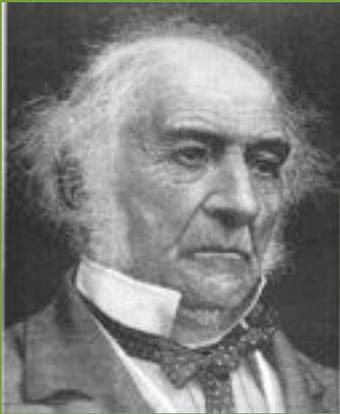


Figure 18.1 Prime Minister Gladstone shown standing outside a London pub. Combination print photograph reproduced by Messrs. Boning and Small by making two exposures. (From Jelf 1894, 520).



Photography and Naturalism

[Photography was consistent] with the empiricist assumptions and methodological procedures of naturalism. Scientific naturalism assumed the existence of pure facts... But it also called for methods of observation and analysis which were independent of the prejudices and interests of the observer. David Green, "Veins of Resemblance: Photography and Eugenics"



The "Criminal Type"



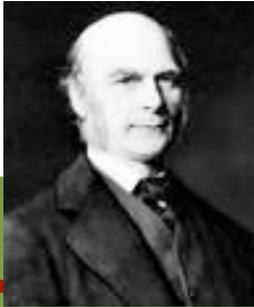
Cesare Lombroso

Lombroso: Hereditary criminals are identified by large jaws, handle-shaped ears, shifty eyes, etc.



The criminal is "an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals."

"Revolutionaries and political criminals -- the semi-insane and morally insane"

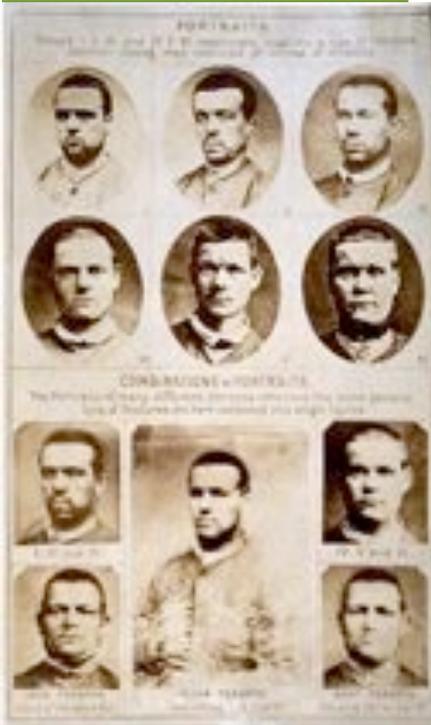


Francis Galton

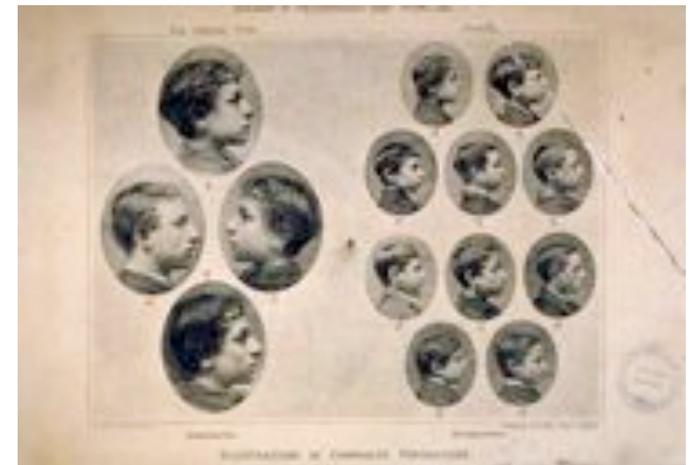
Eugenics and Photography

1870's: Darwin's cousin Francis Galton makes composite photographs, part as aid to criminology, part as effort to apply Darwinism to human differences. Coins *eugenics*, "nature vs nurture," "regression to the mean," notion of statistical correlation, pioneers questionnaires and surveys.

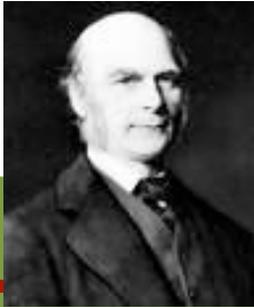
With Wm. Herschel, tries to put study of fingerprints on a scientific basis.



Composite:
Violent
Criminals



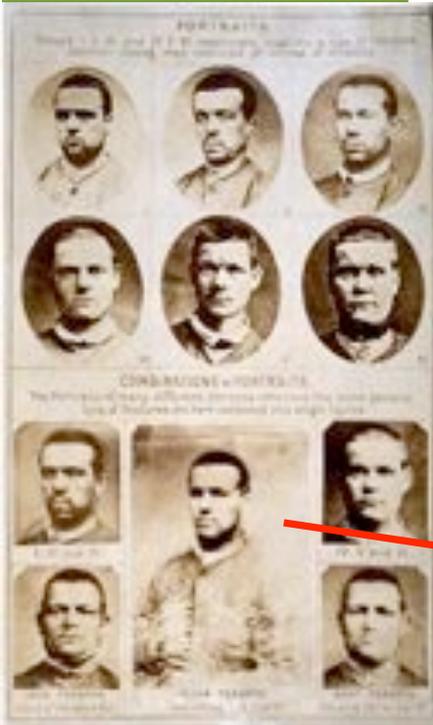
Composite: Jews



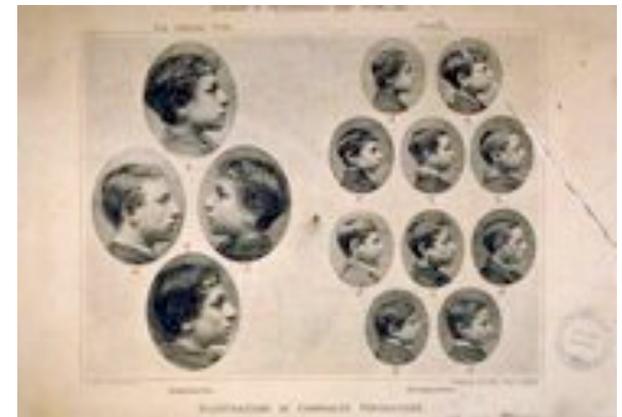
Francis Galton

Composite Types & "Objectivity"

"... the imaginative power even of the highest artists is far from precise, and... no two artists agree in any of their typical forms. The merit of the photographic composite is its mechanical precision, being subject to no errors beyond those incidental to all photographic productions." Francis Galton



Composite:
Violent
Criminals



Composite Jews



Photography in Science

Scientific Atlases: The tension between the typical and the characteristic



From Bernhard Albinus' *Table of the Skeleton and Muscles of the Human Body*, 1749

As skeletons differ from one another, not only as to the age, sex, stature and perfection of the bones, but likewise in the marks of strength, beauty and make of the whole; I made choice of one that might discover signs of both strength and agility; the whole of it elegant... Yet however it was not altogether so perfect, but something occurred in it less complete than one could wish. As therefore painters, when they draw a handsome face, if there happens to be any blemish in it mend it in the picture, thereby to render the likeness the more beautiful; so those things which were less perfect, were mended in the figure, and were done in such a manner as to exhibit more perfect patterns..." Albinus



Rhododendron argenteum, Joseph Hooker, 1849



Photography in Science

The virtues of the typical

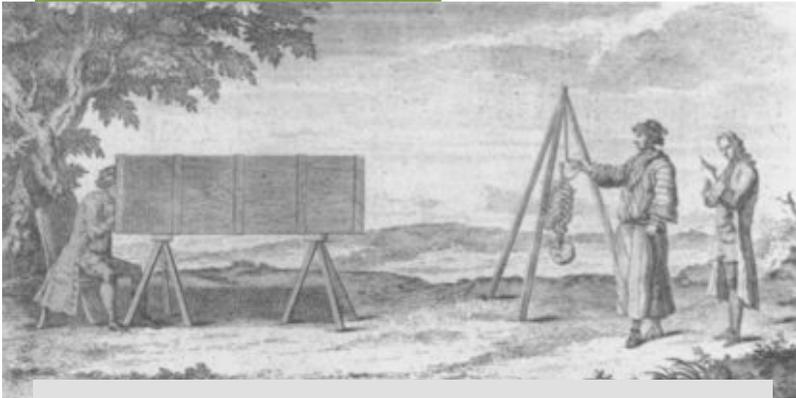
...an anatomical archetype [*Typus*] will be suggested here, a general picture containing the forms of all animals as potential, one which will guide us to an orderly description of each animal. . . .

The mere idea of an archetype in general implies that no particular animal can be used as our point of comparison; the particular can never serve as a pattern [*Muster*] for the whole.' Goethe

But rendering the typical leaves too much discretion to "subjective" judgment...



Photography in Science



Cheselden preparing an anatomical atlas, 1733

Portraying the particular:

We have no Lionardo [sic] de Vinci, Calcar, Fialetti, or Berrettini, but the modern draughtsman makes up in comprehension of the needs of science all that he lacks in artistic genius. We can boast no engravings as effective as those of the broadsheets of Vesal, or even of the plates of Bidloo and Cheselden, but we are able to employ new processes that reproduce the drawings of the original object *without error of interpretation*, and others that give us very useful effects of colour at small expense.
Wm Anderson, 1885



Photographic exhibits: The debate over interpretation

The limits of X-rays to display micro-anatomy, the temptation to "clarify" images:

"I have vigorously avoided artistic aids; in those few cases where, because of the uneven covering of the emulsion [*Deckung*] on the negative, a few visible contours had to be added afterwards, I have explicitly so indicated." Rudolph Grashey, 1905

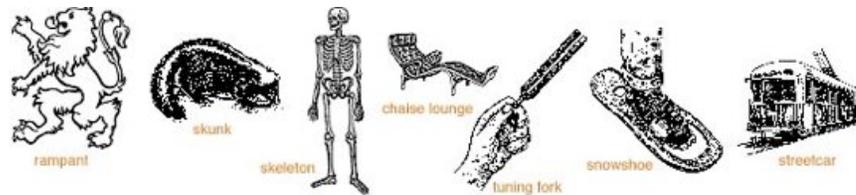




Photos of Concepts

Can a photo illustrate a concept?

"Photographs are necessarily of unidealized individual things, whether zebras, geese, or medieval churches [whereas] drawings may represent a composite distillation." Sydney Landau



Merriam Webster illustrations for *rampant*, *skunk*, *skeleton*, etc.



American Heritage illustrations for *brioche*, *brocade*, *espadrille*.



Rise of the Mass Press



The Second Newspaper Revolution



Increasing political influence...

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

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

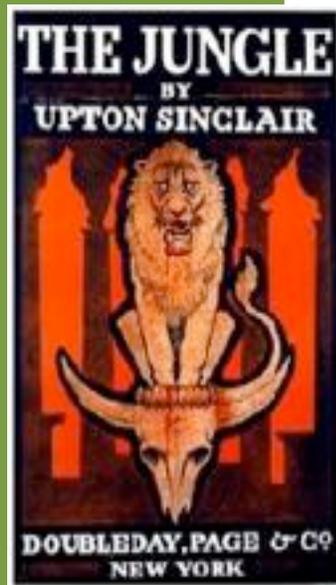


Lincoln Steffens





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

Stressed "impartiality"

Circulation goes from 9000 to 350,000 in 1920

NEGROES LYNCHED BY A MOB

—
THREE SHOT TO DEATH AT MEMPHIS, TENN.
—

BINGLEADERS OF A PARTY WHICH AMBUSHED AND SHOT FOUR DEPUTY SHERIFFS — THE WATCHMAN WAS BOUND AND THE JAILER SLEPT.

MEMPHIS, Tenn., March 9.—At dawn this morning the dead bodies of three negroes riddled with bullets and partly covered with brush were found in a lot about one and a half miles from the heart of the city. The bodies as they lay outstretched told of the terrible work of masked men at 3 o'clock this morning.

The negroes, whose bodies were literally shot to pieces by this mob, were Calvin McDowell, William Stuart, and Theodore Moss.

The crime for which this summary vengeance was wreaked upon them was the ambushing and shooting down on Saturday night last of four Deputy Sheriffs in a negro locality known as the Curve while the officers were fulfilling their duty in looking for a negro for whose arrest they had a warrant.

About 3 o'clock this morning seventy-five men, all wearing masks, appeared in Front Street, near the jail. Whence they came no one hazards a guess. No one saw them assemble; no officer of the law noticed their passage through any streets, nor did any person intercept them in their quick and quiet march to the Shelby County Jail. At this time Watchman O'Donnell sat in the jail office having a chat with a friend named Seat. Suddenly

The price of "impartiality"

ern circles that the British committee was moved to action upon the ex parte statements of a mulatto refugee, who was a refugee because she had imputed unchastity to the victims of negro outrages in the South. Upon the whole, we

"It is a peculiar fact that the crime for which Negroes have frequently been lynched, and occasionally been put to death with frightful tortures, is a crime to which negroes are particularly prone." NY Times editorial, 1894, decrying mob violence

"Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women."



Ida B. Wells



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 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



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



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, ert.

Schudson: 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'"



Objectivity as a Conscious Norm



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

"The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts.

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



What makes for "objectivity"?



Schudson: Objectivity as a conscious norm

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"Balance"

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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.

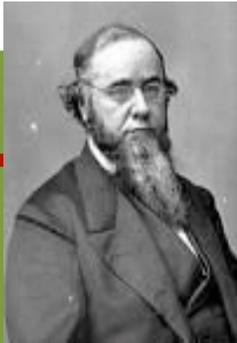
Lincoln Steffens on his years on the *Post*



The objective voice

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



Edwin Stanton

Features of Objectivity

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.

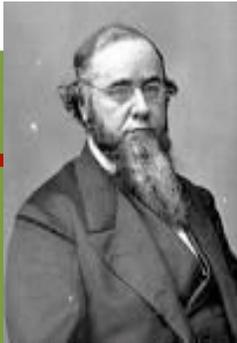
The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theatre.

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



Edwin Stanton

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The Lead: Who, what, where, when, why & how?

The most important info goes first.

BODY

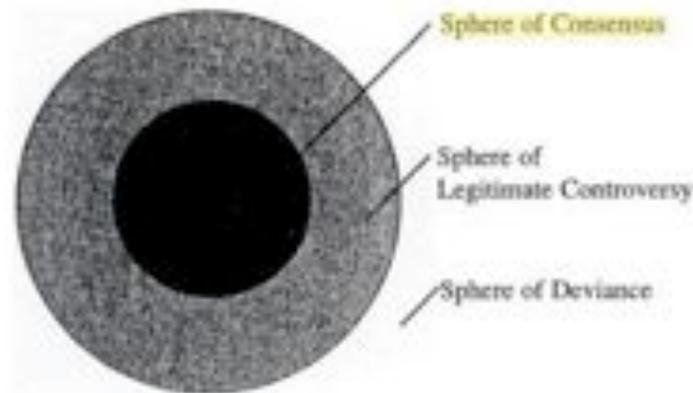
Develop your "news peg" with supporting info, interviews, overviews or references.

As the story goes on, your details should become less & less important.



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



Suspending Objectivity

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."



Suspending Objectivity?

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.



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.

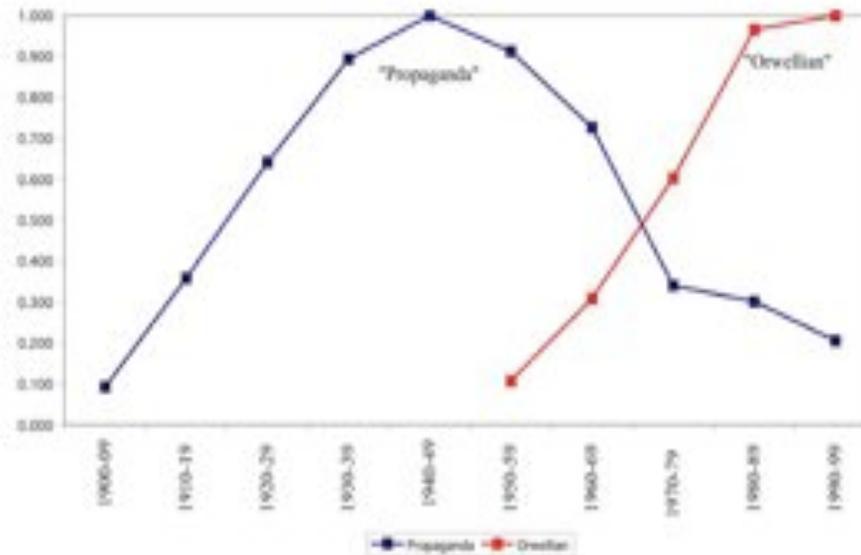
"Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning.. Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmatic aura." Will Irwin, Propaganda and the News

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"

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



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

Increasing suspicion of propaganda:

1939 poll shows 40 percent of Americans blame propaganda for the US entry into the First World War.



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



Reactions to Objectivity, 2

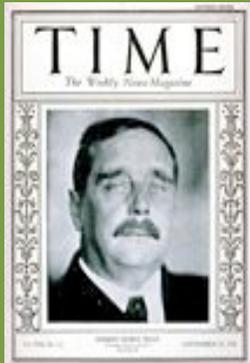
Acknowledgement of public's difficulty in digesting & interpreting "raw facts"

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



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"



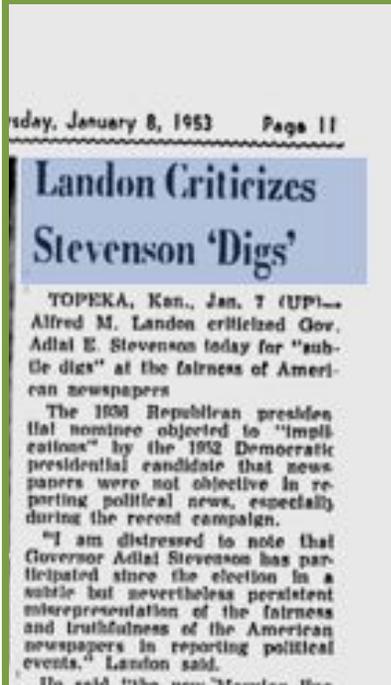
Cf Harold Ickes on press bias in early 1940's:

"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.



The Shifting Meaning of "Bias"



"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)

TABLE 2
DATA FROM SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE CHECKED WHILE SEEING FILM

GROUP	N	TOTAL NUMBER OF INFRACTIONS CHECKED AGAINST			
		DARTMOUTH TEAM		PRINCETON TEAM	
		MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Dartmouth students	48	4.3*	2.7	4.4	2.8
Princeton students	49	9.8*	5.7	4.2	3.5

* Significant at the .01 level.



Recent Attacks on Objectivity

[M]embers 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



Bias, Balance, and Blogs

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

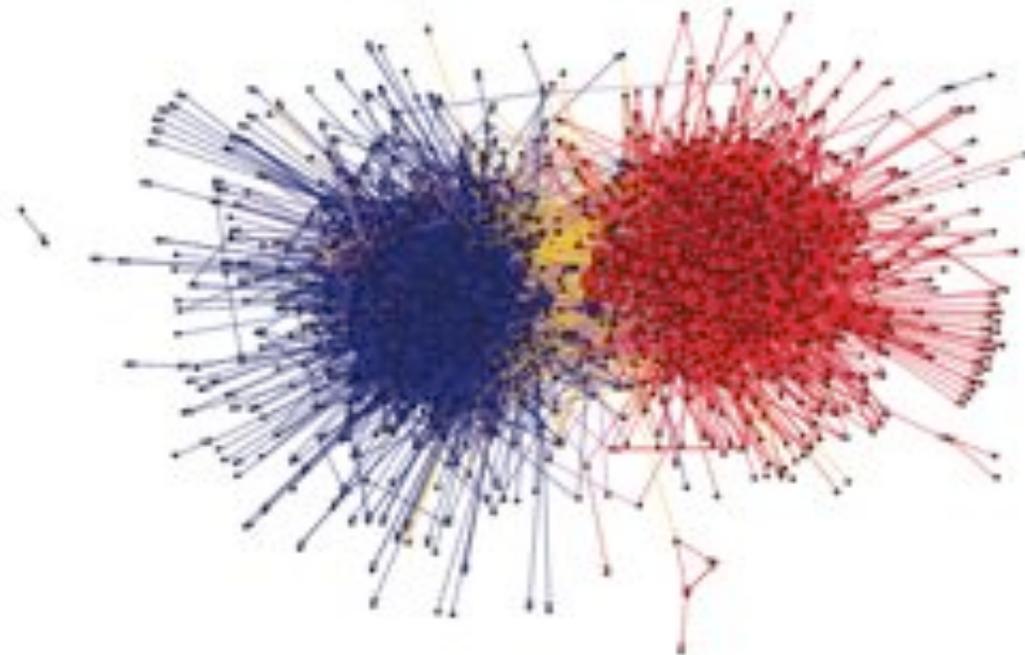


Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [11] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones from conservative to liberal. The size of each blog reflects the number of other blogs that link to it.

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?