

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

Information and Objectivity

Concepts of Information i218
Geoff Nunberg

April 11, 2013



Agenda

Information and objectivity

What are objectivity?

The emergence of objectivity

Objectivity and the photograph

The rise (and fall) of "objectivity"



The objectivity of 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 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"

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

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 “objectivity” of information

"objective information"

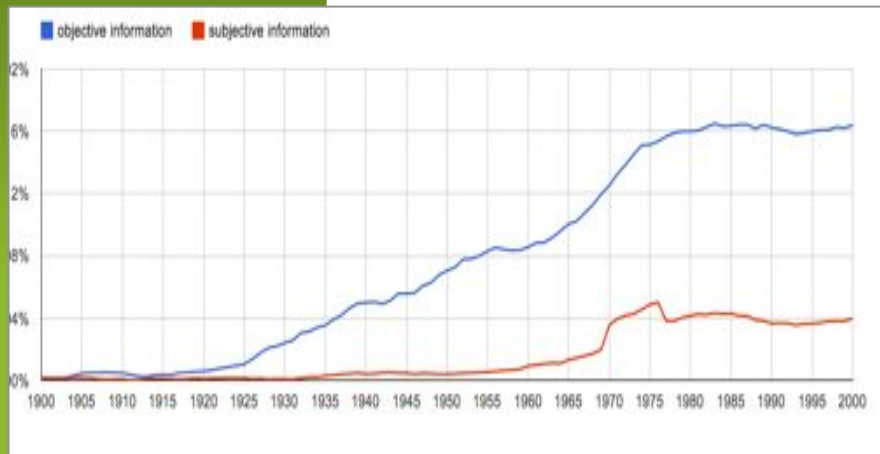
About 4,430,000 results (0.27 seconds)

"subjective information"

About 303,000 results (0.31 seconds)

“Information” is (presumably) transferable, “interpreter-neutral”; retains meaning/significance from one context to the next.
Cf news as “Les infos,” etc.

Objectivity a precondition for the metaphysical autonomy of information



[YCharts - Information, Not Opinion - Headline Grabs Archive - Forbes](#)
[blogs.forbes.com/ycharts/headline-grabs/](#)
About Me. YCharts.com covers over 5000 U.S. companies and manages over 40 million investor trends in real-time. Fundamental research and empirical data ...

[News is information, not opinion. | Hector Hugo](#)
[hectorhugo.wordpress.com/2011/.../news-is-information-not-opinion...](#)
Mar 31, 2011 – News is **information**, not **opinion**. The news should inform; don't be fed another's opinion. Mainstream media is only good to see which ...

[Information, Not Opinion, Leads Twitter | Advertising Agency Blog](#)
[www.advertisingagencyblog.com/.../information-not-opinion-leads-t...](#)
Nov 17, 2009 – Marketers monitoring Twitter for mentions of their brand may have noticed that microbloggers are more likely to give or seek information than to ...

[INFORMATION, NOT OPINION - Tags: LETTERS to the editor...](#)
[connection.ebscohost.com/letters/.../information-not-opinion](#)
EBSCOhost serves thousands of libraries with premium essays, articles and other content including **INFORMATION, NOT OPINION**. Get access to over 12 ...

[Plinky | "News is information, not opinion." by Hector Hugo](#)
[www.plinky.com/answers/140795](#)
Mar 31, 2011 – News is **information**, not **opinion**. The news should inform; don't be fed another's opinion. Mainstream media is only good to see which ...



The “objectivity” of information

Objective vs. Subjective Information

Objective information is:

observable: able to be seen, heard or touched, smelled, tasted
factual
able to be counted
able to be described
able to be imitated
the same from multiple reporters
as close to truth as we can get
helpful in decision making

Objective Language:

I saw...
I counted...
I observed...

Subjective information is:

opinion
judgment
assumption
belief
rumor
suspicion
varies: person-to-person, day-to-day
destructive in decision making

Subjective language

S/he did not want to...
S/he does not like...
S/he thought...
S/he feels...
S/he thinks...

5.5 Evaluating the Objectivity of Web Sites

A source can be considered objective if the content has not been influenced by emotions, personal prejudices, or the desire to influence the person reading it. Information presented in a manner that attempts to sway the reader is considered *biased*.

If the site relates to a controversial topic, are different sides of the argument represented evenly? When different viewpoints are evenly represented, the site can be considered unbiased or *balanced*, when they are not, the page is biased.

Many biased pages will feature strongly worded statements claiming the absolute certainty of their conclusions, which are often supported by evidence and documentation - you may find it useful to locate the documented sources and draw your own conclusions about the issue.



The emergence of objectivity



The emergence of objectivity



3 † **a.** Existing as an object of thought or consciousness as opposed to having a real existence; considered as presented to the mind rather than in terms of inherent qualities. *Obs.* (1647)

Cf. “qui constitue un concept, une représentation de l'esprit et non une réalité formelle” Descartes, 1642

“qui a une réalité en lui-même, indépendamment de la connaissance, de la volonté d'un sujet.” de Staël, 1810

Cf also My objective(= “what I have in mind”) is to help the team win.

"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

a. Designating or relating to the lens or combination of lenses in a refracting telescope, microscope, etc., that is nearest the object to be viewed. Freq. in **objective lens**.

1671 The Eye is always more distant from the Convex Objective Glass, than its point of Concourse. (cf *verre objectif*, from 1611)



The emergence of objectivity

Kant: Pure objectivity is the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*), but effectively = intuitive judgments about the properties of objects for that coalesce into a representation (but also requires intersubjective agreement):

The transcendental unity of apperception is that unity through which all the manifold given in an intuition is united in a concept of the object. It is therefore entitled objective, and must be distinguished from the subjective unity of consciousness...*Critique of Pure Reason*



The emergence of objectivity

OED: 3b. That is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the subject; (hence) (more widely) external to or independent of the mind.

8a. Of a person or his or her judgement: not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts; impartial, detached. 1838

'Objective'—This word, so nearly unintelligible in 1821, so intensely scholastic, and, consequently, when surrounded by familiar and vernacular words, so apparently pedantic, yet, on the other hand, so indispensable to accurate thinking, and to wide thinking, has since 1821 become too common to need any apology. Thos. De Quincey, 1856

Cf also 4a. Designating or relating to the lens or combination of lenses in a refracting telescope, microscope, etc., that is nearest the object to be viewed. Freq. in objective lens.



What is (are?) "objectivity"?



The social reach of "objectivity"



Domains of application of "objectivity"

Ethics; Epistemology/philosophy of science
"The essential indexical"

Mathematics & Physical Sciences

Social Sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*

(the role of *Verstehen*)

Institutional & bureaucratic contexts ("objective admissions standards") *cf PD on the state*

Artistic representations (novelistic realism/ "objective point of view," *Neue Sachlichkeit*, non-objective art, etc.)

Journalism & public discourse ("objective reporting")

Ordinary speech. ("I'm going to try to be objective about this") (1838)

But these are obviously connected...



Facets 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 or knowledge of the world. ("objective descriptions," "objective knowledge")

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

Independent of observer's values or perspective.

Rule-or procedure-governed

Uniform for all observers at all times

Mechanically testable or verifiable.

"Fair and balanced"

Dispassionate

To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower — knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence.

Daston & Gallison



Objectivity as a reflective concept

After discussing features of objectivity (impartiality, quantification, truth, sangfroid)...

...I do not wish to make a fetish of the word *objectivity* itself but rather to insist on the critical historical moment in the mid-nineteenth century when previously disjoint meanings and manipulations suddenly coalesce into a single word.... ...scientific objectivity emerges only when these dispersed values, warnings and techniques are forged into a single, if stratified concept, circumscribed by a single word.

Lorraine Daston, “Scientific Objectivity with and Without Words.”



Objectivity as a conscious norm

The position that the wide distribution of social behavior naturally and normally gives rise to a norm prescribing that behavior and attributing moral force to its observation skips over a necessary step. *What causes the norm to be articulated? Explaining the articulation of a norm is part of explaining the norm. ...If a behavior is already in place, what additional work does an articulated norm accomplish?*

Schudson, “The objectivity norm in American journalism

Although mechanical objectivity was nominally in the service of truth to nature, its primary allegiance was to a morality of self-restraint. When forced to choose between accuracy and moral probity, the atlas makers often chose the latter, as we have seen: better to have bad color, ragged tissue edges, and blurred boundaries than even a suspicion of subjectivity. Daston & Galison, p. 117



Is objectivity a single concept?



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

"Objectivity is a conglomerate concept that is more than the sum of its parts. ... complex notions such as objectivity exhibit emergent properties."

Lorraine Daston, "Scientific Objectivity with and Without Words."



Modern Challenges to objectivity

Kuhn & Feyerabend, etc. Foucault..

Objectivity as a regime of truth :

Each society has its regime of truth, ..., the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements... techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who charged with saying what counts as true"

Textualism/Representationalism – it's texts all the way down.



Objectivity and Power

If women are systematically excluded from the design and management of science and their work devalued...

[neither the assessment nor the value of the results] is value-neutral, objective, socially impartial. Sandra Harding, *The science question in feminism*, 1986

Masculine and feminine "objectivities": "I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges."

Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 1991



The roots of objectivity



Conditions favoring objectivity

The rise of modern science

- Statistics & quantitative methods, new tools of observation

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

- Positivism and utilitarianism

- Mass production/interchangeable parts

Other technological advances: photography, the telegraph

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

Political reforms (e.g., civil service): the need for "informed citizenry";

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

Modern journalism, professionalization, circulation-based models, etc. Also wire services.



"objectivity" in the air..



HARD TIMES.

BOOK THE FIRST. SOWING.

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 !



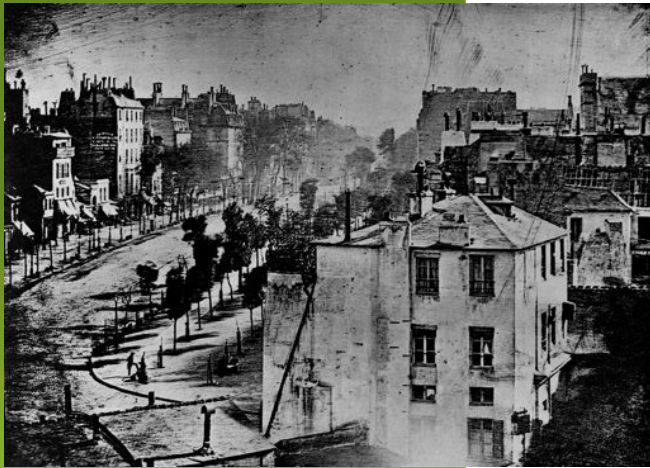
The objective voice

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.... 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 truth of photographs



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, 1839



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



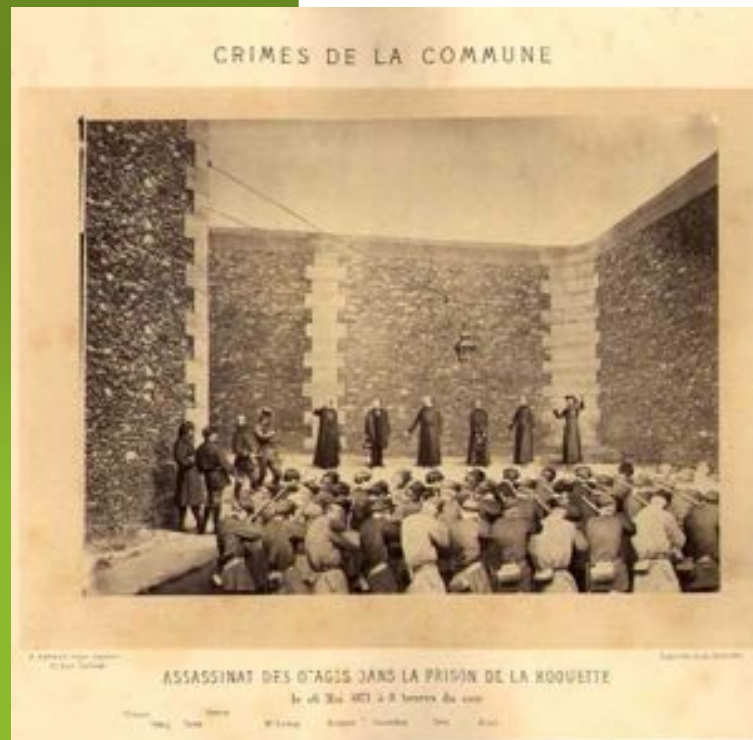
The news as “A daily photograph of the day's events.” (Charles Dana)

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

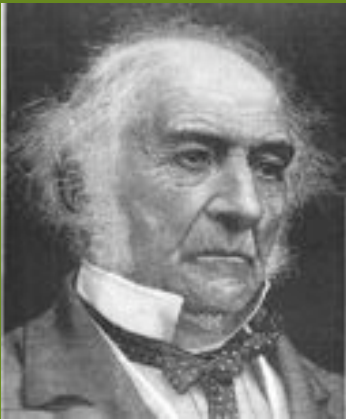


Figure 18.1 Prime Minister Gladstone shown standing outside a London pub. Combination print photograph reproduced by Messrs. Boning and Small by making two exposures. (From Jelf 1894, 520).

Photograph of Gladstone leaving a pub in
Seven Dials



The "Criminal Type"



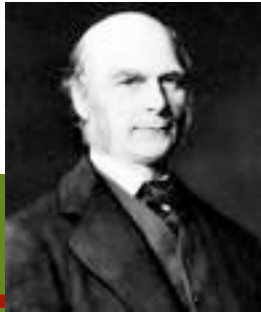
Cesare Lombroso

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"

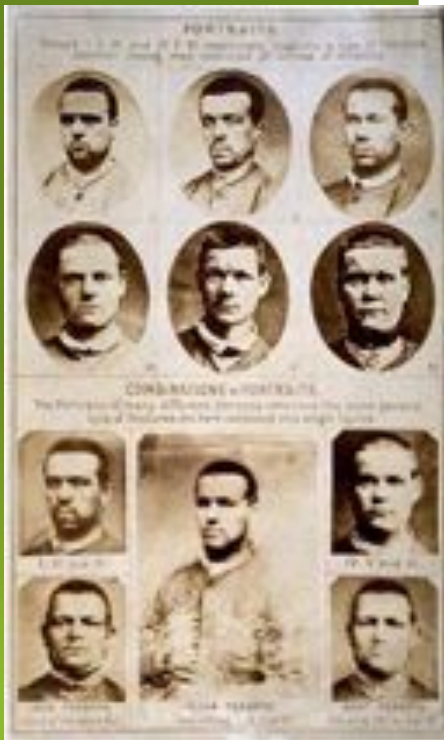


Francis Galton

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.

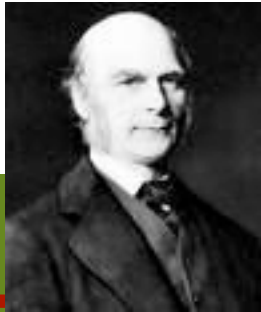
With Wm. Herschel, tries to put study of fingerprints on a scientific basis.



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

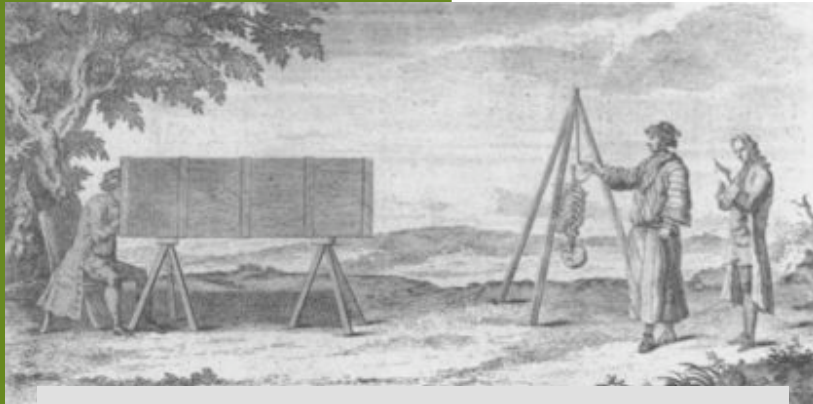
...an anatomical archetype [*Typus*] will be suggested here, a general picture containing the forms of all animals as potential, one which will guide us to an orderly description of each animal. . . .

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

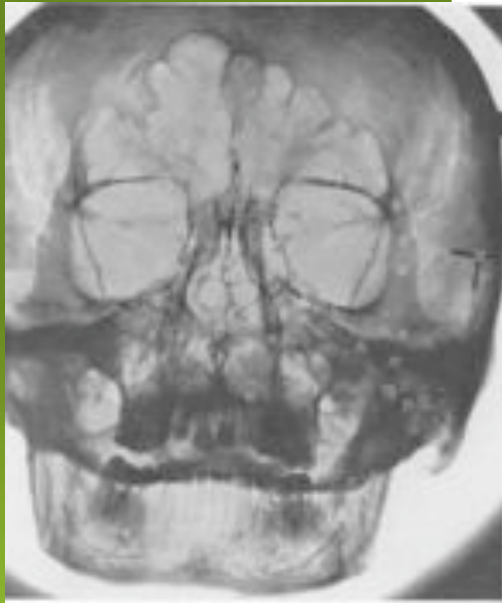
Portraying the particular:

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



The particularity of photographs

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*.



The Rise of "journalistic objectivity"



19th c. forces leading to rise of journalistic 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



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

Now the desideratum of the Telegraph... is this: How can the greatest amount of intelligence be communicated in the fewest words? ...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, 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

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

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

Balance:

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

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*



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.

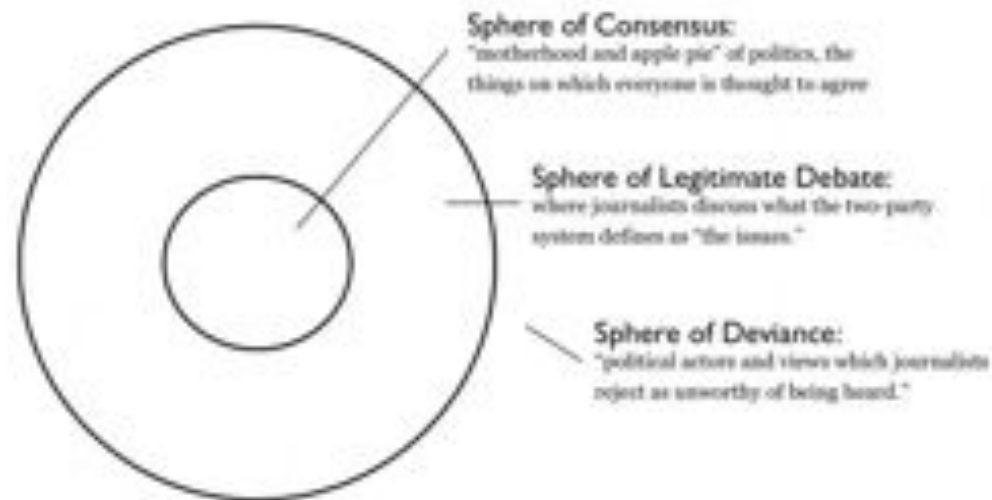
As the story goes on, your details should become less & less important.



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. Also global warming, vaccination...



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



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



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



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, 2

Reflexes in the social sciences, etc.

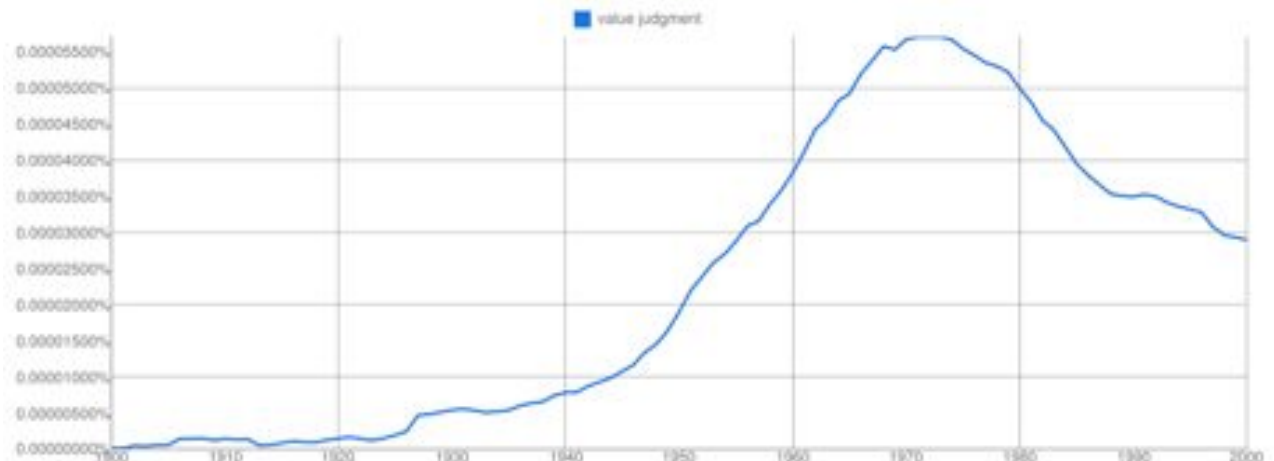
"Objectivity is the way one comes to terms and makes peace with a world one does not like but will not oppose." Alvin Gouldner, 1970

Google labs Books Ngram Viewer

Graph these case-sensitive comma-separated phrases: value judgment

between 1900 and 2000 from the corpus English with smoothing of 3

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The Shifting Meaning of "Bias"



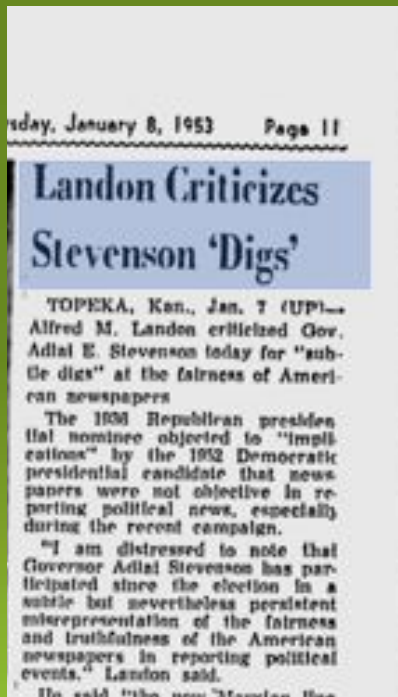
Cf Harold Ickes on press bias in early 1940's:

"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
SEEKING 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:

VWSJ, 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 new media