

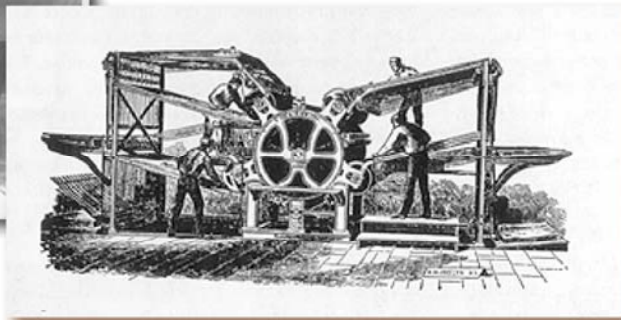
The Dawning of the Age of Information

Geoff Nunberg

IS103

History of Information

10/17/06





Agenda

The rise of the newspaper: technological & social roots

The second newspaper revolution

Defining “the news”

The rise (and fall) of "objectivity"



The Dawn of the Information Age

19th century:

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



"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”

A “natural” development

The democratization of business and politics

Political decisions

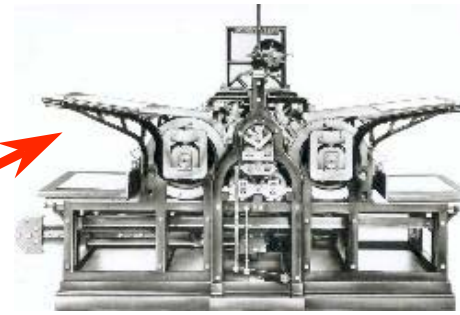




Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies



18th c. Press



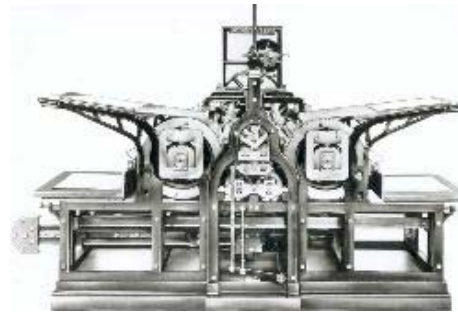
Times Printing Press -- 1814



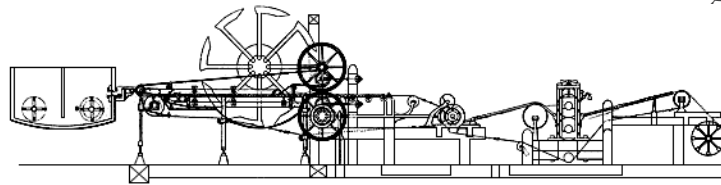
17th c. Press



Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies



Times Printing Press -- 1814

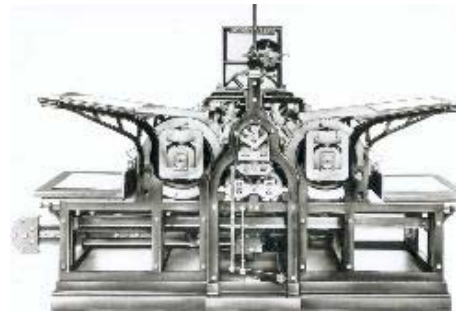


Foudrinier Machine, 1811

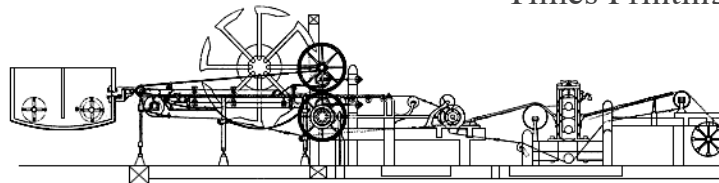




Rise of the modern press: The Interconnection of Technologies



Times Printing Press -- 1814



Foudrinier Machine, 1811



Stephenson's
Rocket, 1827



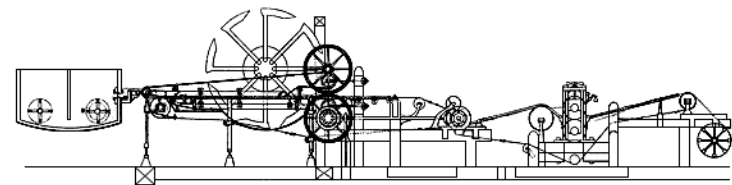
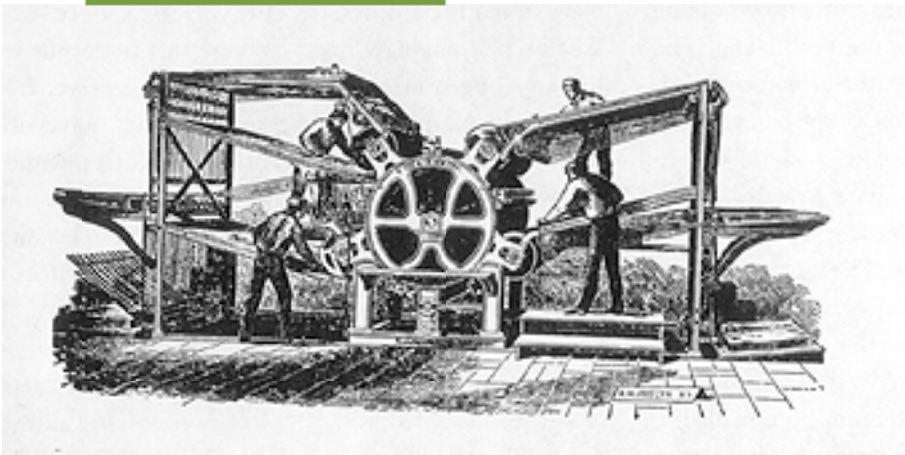


Rise of the Penny Newspaper

technological advances:

steam press,
paper-making machines
stereotypes (Firmin Didot)
rotary press:

invented by Richard Hoe, 1844; capable of
20k impressions/hr



Foudrinier Machine, 1811



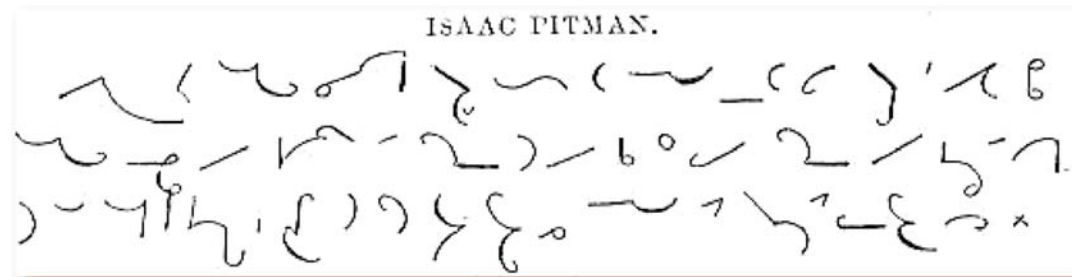
Rise of the Penny Newspaper



Stephenson's
Rocket, 1827

Further technological
Advances:

Railroad, telegraph (from 1840's)
... not to mention shorthand



Pitman Shorthand 1837



Rise of the Penny Newspaper

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”
(Schudson)



The Rise of Literacy

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

Michael Schudson



Rise of the Radical Press



Cobbett

William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

1819: Richard Carlile's *Republican* achieves greater circulation than the *Times* after Carlile is imprisoned for sedition.

The Republican.

No. 2. Vol. 1.] LONDON, FRIDAY, SEPT. 3, 1819. [PRICE 2d.

THE
POOR MAN'S GUARDIAN,
 A Weekly Paper
 (FOR THE PEOPLE.
 PUBLISHED IN DEFIANCE OF "LAW," TO TRY THE POWER
 OF "RIGHT" AGAINST "MIGHT."
 "PARLIAMENT WITHOUT REPRESENTATION IN TRADING, AND COURT TO BE REJECTED."
 Printed and Published by H. Hetherington, 15, Kingsgate Street, Holborn.

No. 140 Saturday, February 1, 1831. [Price 1d.

THE KING'S SPEECH.
Friends, Brethren, and Fellow Countrymen,
 We intended this week to treat you to a comment on the King's Speech. Our mind is altered, for, on inspection, we find it contains nothing to comment on. The Royal Message for 1831 is a perfect insanity. Like the ghosts of Virgil, it sits into thin air the moment you grasp at it. Last year it was the shade of something—this year it is the shadow of a shade.

But to descend from metaphors. The royal speech is a sad affair. It is the same hollow-hearted, mystified sort of production that it has ever been—an exemplification of the art of saying nothing, under the ostentatious pretence of making important disclosures. Not a word does it say of the state of the country—not a word of sorrow for our sufferings—of hope for the future.

We beg pardon—there is some condolence expressed for the landed-interest. But here, as in every thing else, we find the *stupid smug*. The condolence is for the landlord, not the labourer—it is to keep up rents, not to raise wages. It is condolence to prevent the repeal of the starvation Corn Laws, and lest there should be any mistake upon it, honest Lord Althorpe avowed the fact within a few hours after the speech was delivered.

FALSE RADICALS, OR WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.
 In the *Monthly Repository* for the present month, we find the following in an article headed "The Taxes on Knowledge:"—

"It has been found that even children are amused and instructed by works of a higher order than the necessary sales of the last generation; and the immense sale of the *Penny Magazine* is a triumphant proof, not indeed that everybody was understand the Principles of Newton, but that a journal may attain the greatest possible circulation without pandering to either vice or folly. With this fact before our eyes, what is the sale of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, and all the other cheap but intemperate periodicals published in defiance of the stamp-taxes? To whom is it not evident that they only maintain a feeble existence by means of their illegality, and that the moment they shall lose their notoriety as victims to government persecutions, and be exposed to the competition of journals equally cheap, but more able and intelligent, they will die a natural death."

This is the way of all these scribes. They never miss an opportunity to run us down where they can do so without the risk of exposure. The *Poor Man's Guardian* has been calumniated or vilified by at least one half of the Stamped Press, but not a miscreant of them has ever yet dared to enter the lists with us in the fair field of argument. Like the Trojan Paris, they will shoot from behind a fence, but as to an open, stand-up fight in the broad day, they would as soon think of hanging themselves. They talk of our "wildness"—our "appeals to the bad passions of the lowest class"—our "visionary and absurd doctrines." Why do they not then expose our "wildness" and "absurdity" in their publications, or even in *ours*, for we have never refused them the use of our columns! If they believe we mislead the people, why do they not correct the evil through the same channel by which it is circulated? Why do they not address a letter to the *Poor Man's Guardian* pointing out his errors, or ignorance! or why refuse to us the like accommodation in their columns? Mark the difference between our conduct and theirs! If we censure or expose them in the *Guardian*, we not only give reasons (and irrefragable ones too) for so doing, but we invite the parties animadverted upon to defend themselves (if they can) in our columns, not excluding even personal attacks upon ourselves, when they appear under real signatures. How different is their conduct! They misrepresent and vilify our principles, and if we demand to set them and the public right, through the same channel in which the injustice is done, lo! their publications are hermetically sealed against us. Such is the justice of "respectable" journals.

A modern writer observes that more villainy is practised now-a-days, under the mask of "liberalism," than any other whatever, not excepting even "religion." This is true, but not surprising. It is a policy as old as the world. It is by borrowing the garb of virtue that vice always triumphs. When Constantine wanted to destroy the Christian religion, he feigned a conversion to it, and having by this means disarmed opposition, he soon destroyed every existing trace of it, except the name. A similar

VOL. 3.



The Second Newspaper Revolution

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

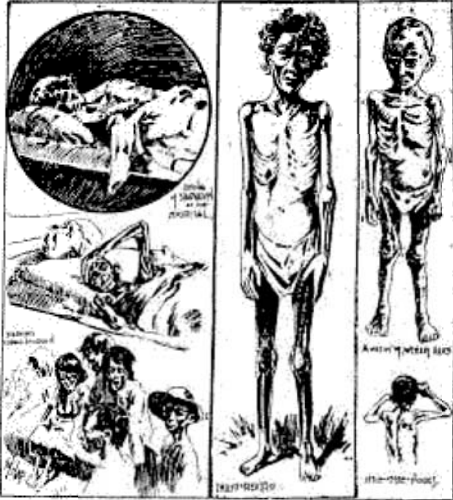


Joseph Pulitzer



Randolph Hearst

WHAT SENATOR PROCTOR SAW IN CUBA



SPANIARDS SEARCH WOMEN ON AMERICAN STEAMSHIP



The Second Newspaper Revolution

News as popular entertainment.

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

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





The Birth of "Muckraking"



The connection to political Progressivism.

"In Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" you may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hand; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor.

Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing. ... But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck-rake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces for evil.

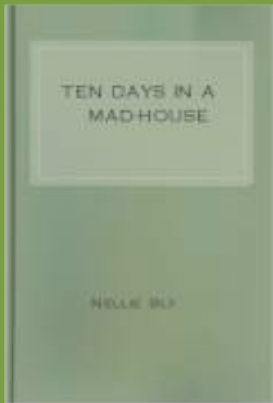
Theodore Roosevelt, 1906



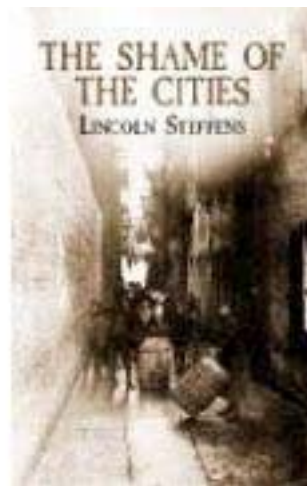
The Birth of "Muckraking"



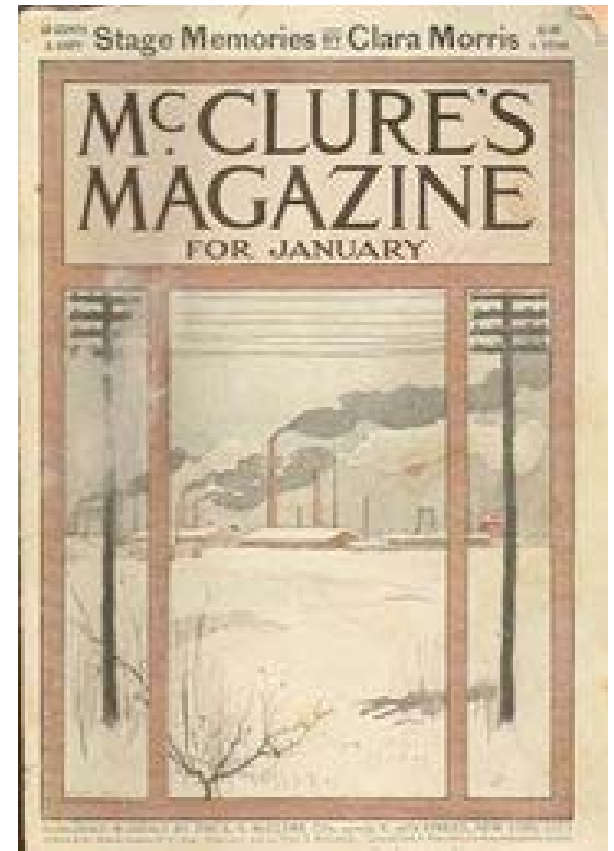
Nellie Bly
(Elizabeth Cochran)



Ida Tarbell

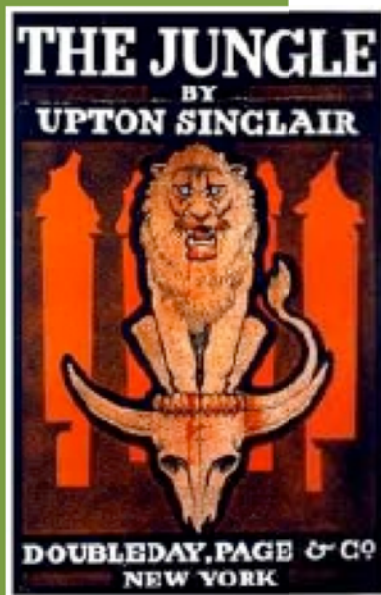


Lincoln Steffens





The Birth of "Muckraking"

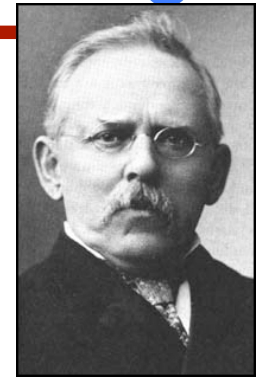


Upton Sinclair





The Birth of "Muckraking"



Jacob Riis:
How the Other Half L.



establishing the news

truth
fact
news
speculation
comment
rumour
gossip
hoax
falsehood



establishing the news

What makes for news?

form

seriality

periodicity

voice

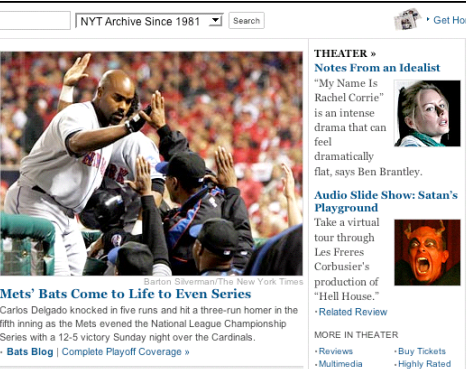
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Defining "the News"

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

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.



News and the creation of imagined community



The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. - Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[Britain] has become a nation of readers. - Samuel Johnson, 1781



Defining "the News"

But of other features that make stories
"newsworthy":

plane crashes > winter furnace breakdowns

incomes 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





Defining "the News"

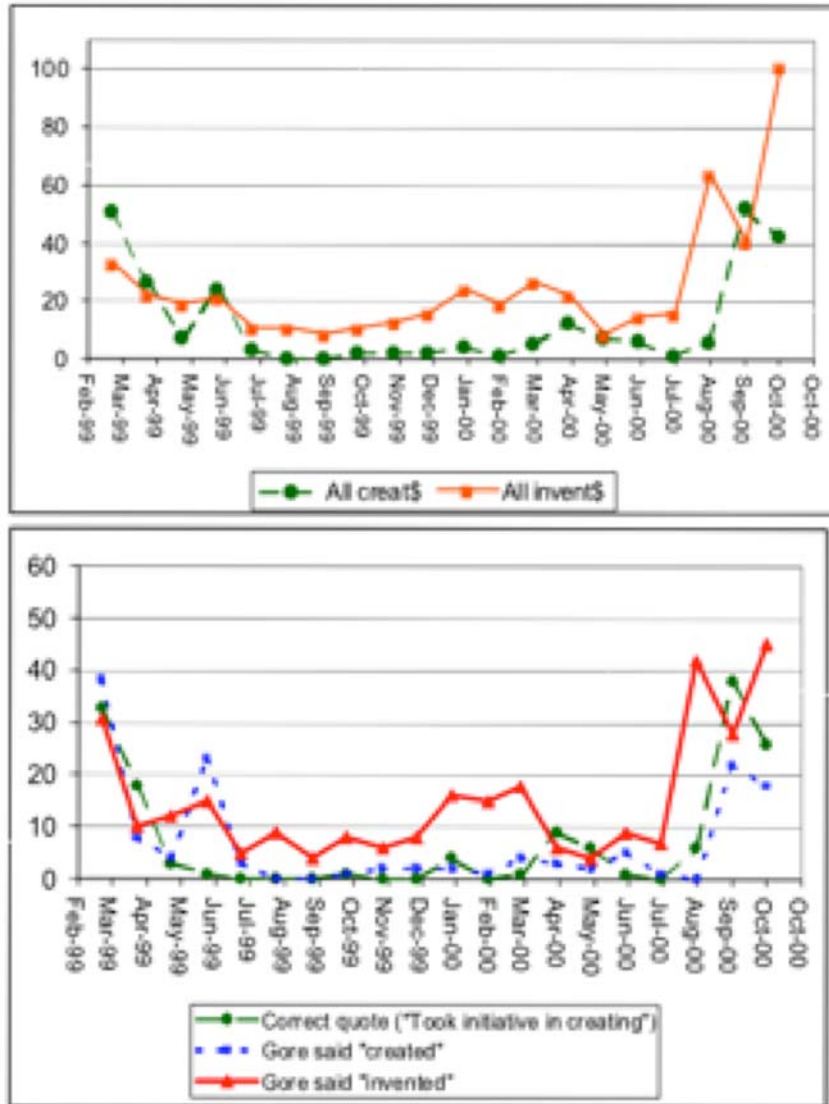


2005 (Year of Katrina): Networks run 44 stories on Michael Jackson, 22 on poverty.



Figure 1

Time Series of Attributions in Top 50 Newspapers



Easy to understand > hard to understand

Cf Chip Heath on spread of
“Gore claims he invented
the Internet”



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

The cult of science

Growth of wire services



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



Features of Objectivity

- Truthfulness/Facticity/Accuracy
Reporting as "mirror," "window," "photograph." "A daily photograph of the day's events." (Charles Dana)
- Balance
- “naïve empiricism”
--> facts are “real”
- Nonpartisanship
"If people knew how I felt on an issue, I had failed in my mission" Walter Cronkite
- Detachment
Objectivity prizes "information" over "story"



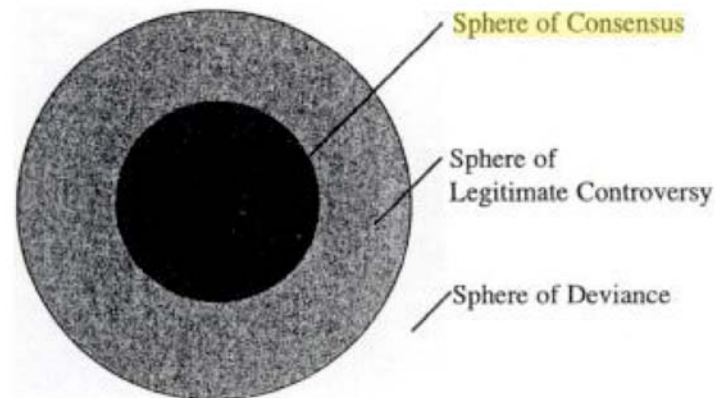
Features of Objectivity

- Truthfulness/Facticity/Accuracy

Reporting as "mirror," "window," "photograph." "A daily photograph of the day's events." (Charles Dana)

- Balance: Presumes a common perspective

Cf. Hallin on "spheres" of public discourse





Features of Objectivity



“Naïve empiricism”: Facts are “in the world”

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



Features of Objectivity



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AP Washington bureau chief, 1866



Features of Objectivity



Edwin Stanton

Form -- the inverted pyramid

This evening at about 9:30 p.m. at Ford's Theatre, the President while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Harris and Major Rathburn, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

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

The pistol ball entered the back of the President's head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal.

The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted, and is now dying.

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

NY Herald, 4/15/1865



Reactions to Objectivity, 2

Realization of limits of “objectivity” 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



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

Attacks on “objectivity” from the left

Arguments that objectivity is unattainable; the inevitability of subjectivity



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.



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



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" as collection of attitudes, ethical principles, stylistic guidelines, and professional practices, etc.



The Properties of Information

Properties of Information

Information is corpuscular (morselized),
quantifiable, commoditized

Information is objective & transparent

The intelligence that came from afar ... 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 Storyteller")

Cf "Human information" vs. "human knowledge"

Information is public

"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*)

Cf "How much information is there in the world?"



The Phenomenology of Information

The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' It is indispensable for information to sound plausible.

Faith in "information" follows from the form of the document itself.





The roots of "objectivity"

Continual concerns about the stability of "public opinion" --

Conception of the public sphere presupposes a certain model of how the discourse should be conducted. A sense that if people don't play by those rules, civil society (and democracy) is impossible.