

# Information, Objectivity, and Propaganda

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**History of Information 103**  
**Geoff Nunberg**

**March 15, 2012**



## Agenda: 3 / 15

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Rise of the mass press

The emergence of “objectivity”

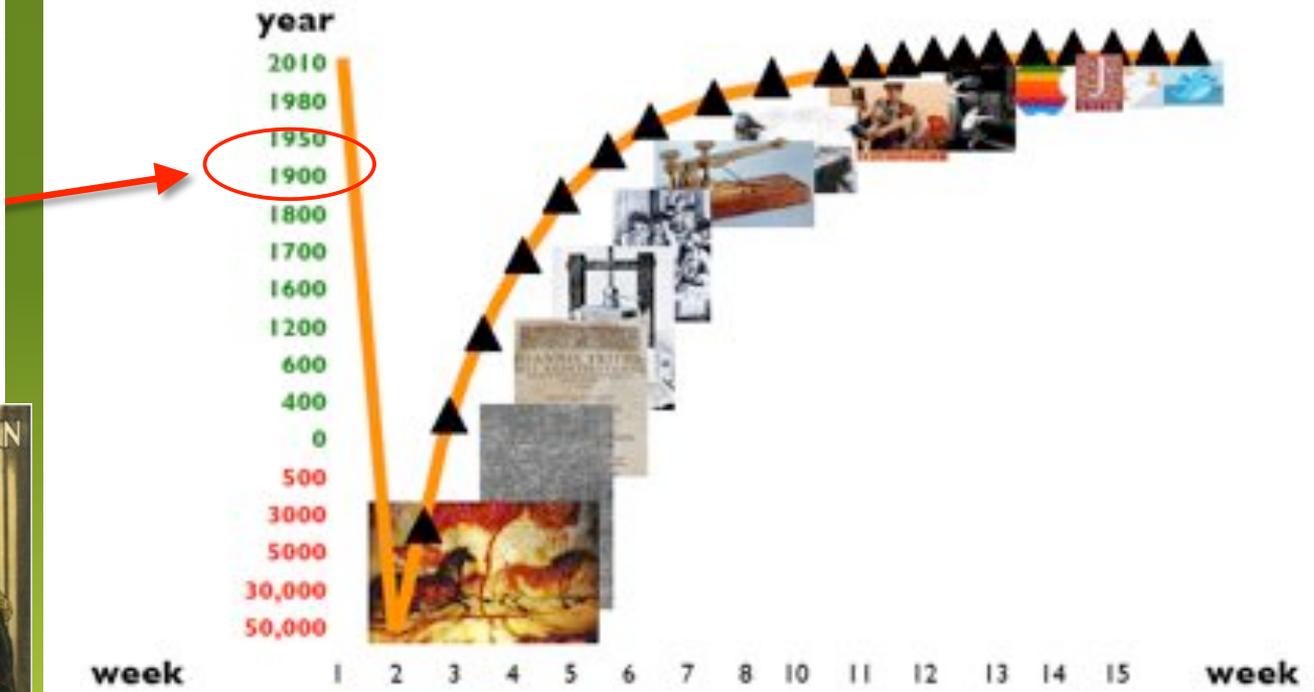
On Propaganda

Informing the public

Is objectivity possible?



# Where We Are





# "The First Information Revolution"

Growth of common schools:

1800-1825: proportion of children in schools from 37 to 60%

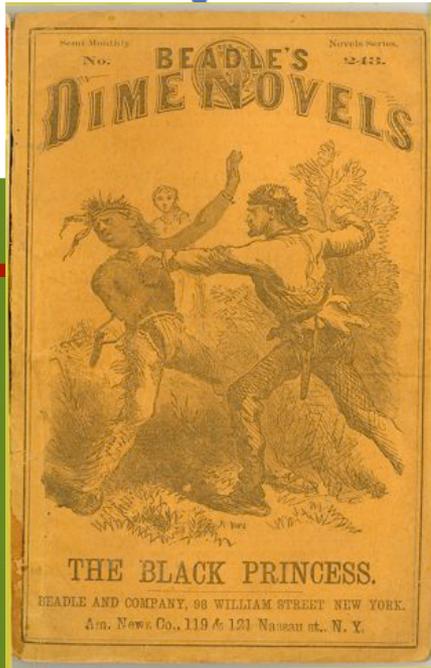
Creation of the modern census

Modern postal service

Urbanization

Increased literacy -- a "nation of readers"

The democratization of business and politics



# "The First Information Revolution"

Penny newspapers, circulating libraries, "dime novels"...

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





# Rise of the Penny Newspaper



James Gordon  
Bennett

## "Causes" of the revolution:

Technological developments

Increased literacy -- a "nation of readers"

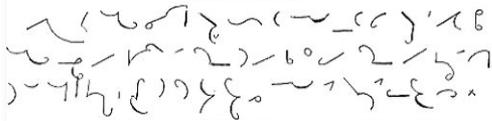
The democratization of business and politics



NY Herald, 1842



ISAAC PITMAN.



Pitman Shorthand 1837

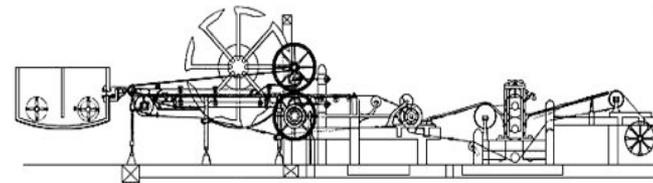
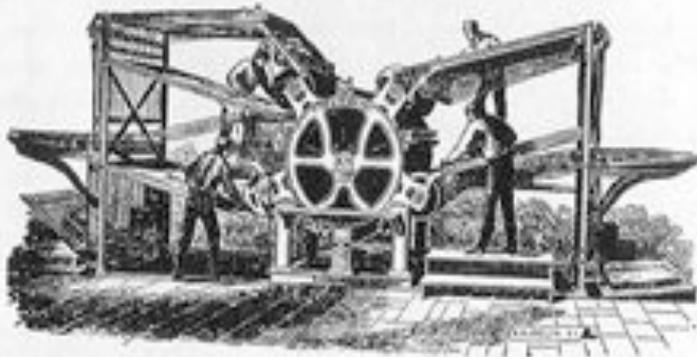
# Rise of the Penny Newspaper

technological advances:

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

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

Railroad, telegraph (from 1840's)



Foudrinier Machine, 1811



# Rise of the mass press

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



Davis

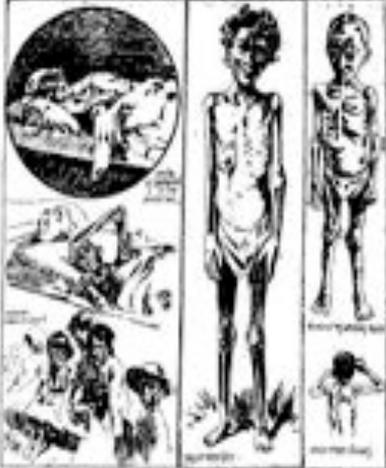
# Rise of the mass press



The portrait and photograph of Davis, which appeared in the New York Journal, led to the arrest of Mr. Davis.

Richard Harding Davis

WHAT SENATOR PROCTOR SAW IN CUBA



SPANIARDS SEARCH WOMEN ON AMERICAN STEAMERS



Increasing political influence...

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



EVERYBODY'S SWEET SONG.



**MY SWEETHEART**  
WENT DOWN WITH THE MAINE.

WORDS AND MUSIC BY BERT MORGAN.



50

FORBIDDEN BY THE MORGAN MUSIC COMPANY, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

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**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

The Examiner

THE SPIRIT OF WAR PERVADES THE BREASTS OF ALL AMERICANS.  
Patriotic Citizens Advocate Enroute to Arms to Wreak Vengeance Upon Spain for the Cruel and Cowardly Destruction of the Maine.





# The Birth of "Muckraking"

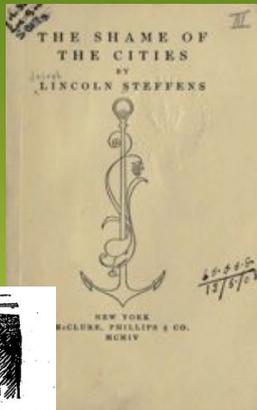
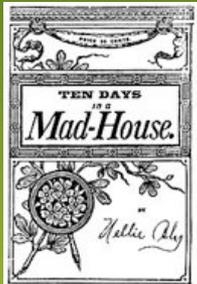
You may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look now way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake himself the filth of the floor.  
Theodore Roosevelt



Nellie Bly  
(Elizabeth Cochran)



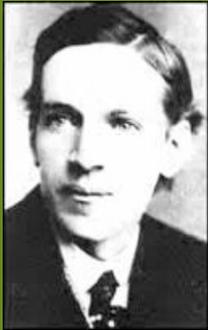
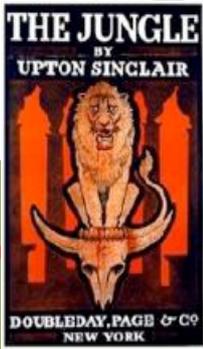
Ida Tarbell



Lincoln Steffens



McClure's: from 100k in 1895 to 500k in 1907



Upton Sinclair



# The Birth of "Muckraking"

All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda.

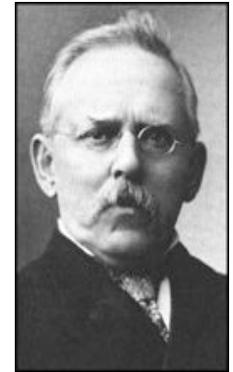
It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.

Upton Sinclair





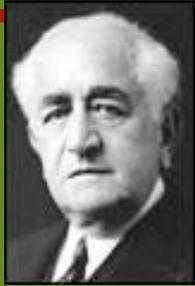
# The Birth of "Muckraking"



Jacob Riis:  
*How the Other Half Lives*



## The "higher journalism"



1896: Adolph Ochs takes over the NY Times

Stresses “decency,” reform; giving the news ‘impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved

Publisher as a "vendor of information"

Circulation goes from 9000 to 350,000 in 1920



Growth of magazines:

from 180 in 1879 (2d class postage introduced) to 1800 in 1900.



# Defining the "News"

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# 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, founder of Le Figaro



Le Figaro, 1856

“One Englishman is a story. Ten Frenchmen is a story. One hundred Germans is a story. And nothing ever happens in Chile.” (Apocryphal?) Posting in a London newsroom.

*“A local man bit a dog yesterday.”*



Villemessant



# Prioritizing "the News"

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But of 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*)



# The Rise of "objectivity"

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# The emergence of "objectivity"

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# 19th c. forces leading to rise of journalistic objectivity

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Rise of Science

Influence of photography

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...  
Frank B. Noyes, president of the Associated Press, 1913



# What makes for "objectivity"?

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## "Facticity"

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

privileges "information" over "story"





# What makes for "objectivity"?

## Detachment:

Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone.

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*



# What makes for "objectivity"?

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## 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

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## Detachment: Creation of the “degree zero” voice

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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

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.

# NEGROES LYNCHED BY A MOB

THREE SHOT TO DEATH AT MEMPHIS, TENN.

RINGLEADERS 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."



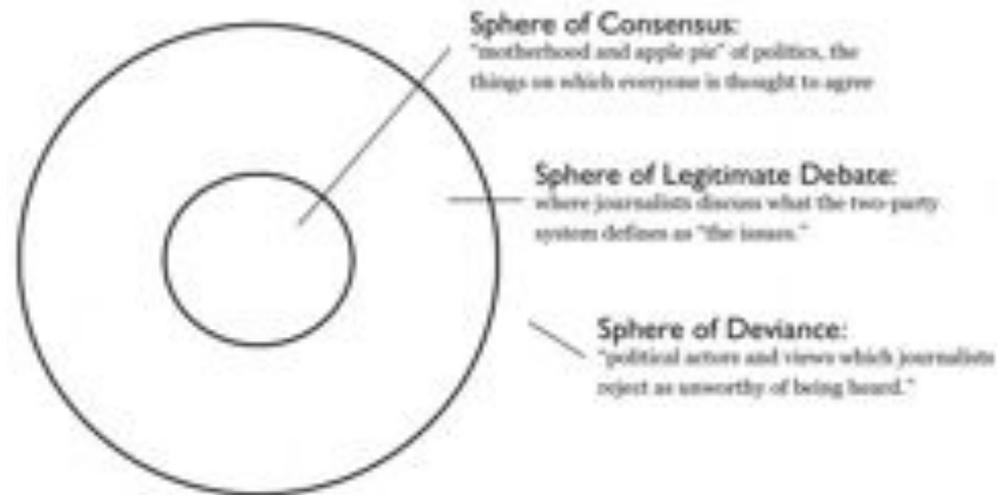
Ida B. Wells



# 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...



# Propaganda

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# Propaganda before "propaganda"





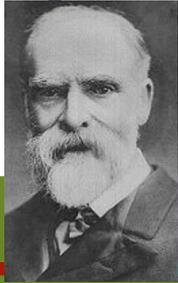
# The Rise of “Propaganda”

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

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

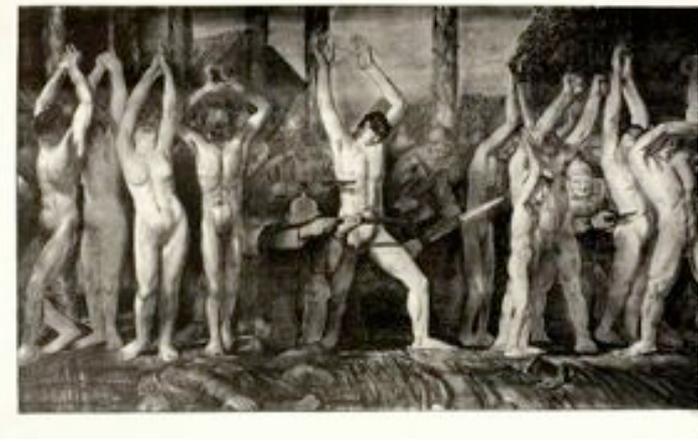
1922: Encyclopedia Britannica first includes propaganda as entry  
States begin to take a direct role in creating & diffusing pro-government views.



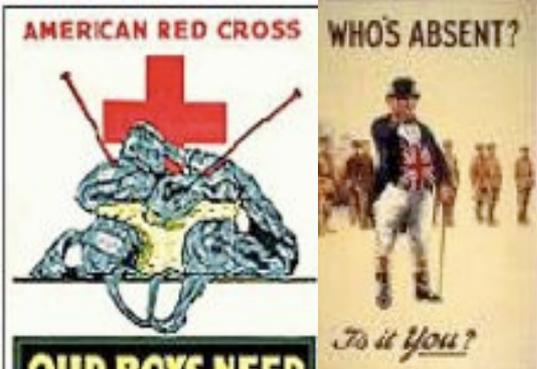
Vicount James Bryce, chairman of the German Outrages Inquiry Committee

# WWI British Propaganda

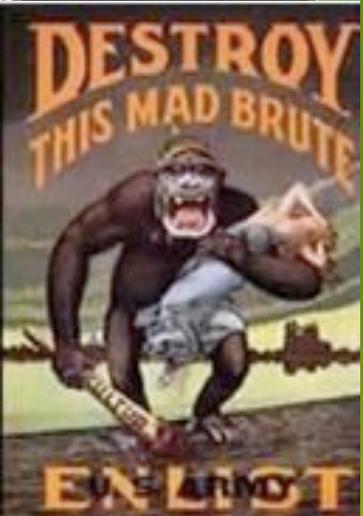
May, 1915: The Bryce Report "substantiates" allegations of German atrocities during invasion of Belgium.



Lithograph by George Bellows, 1918



# The rise of propaganda: 1914-1917



WWI: Creel Committee, “4-minute men,” etc.

75,000 speakers to give short speeches & lantern-slide presentations

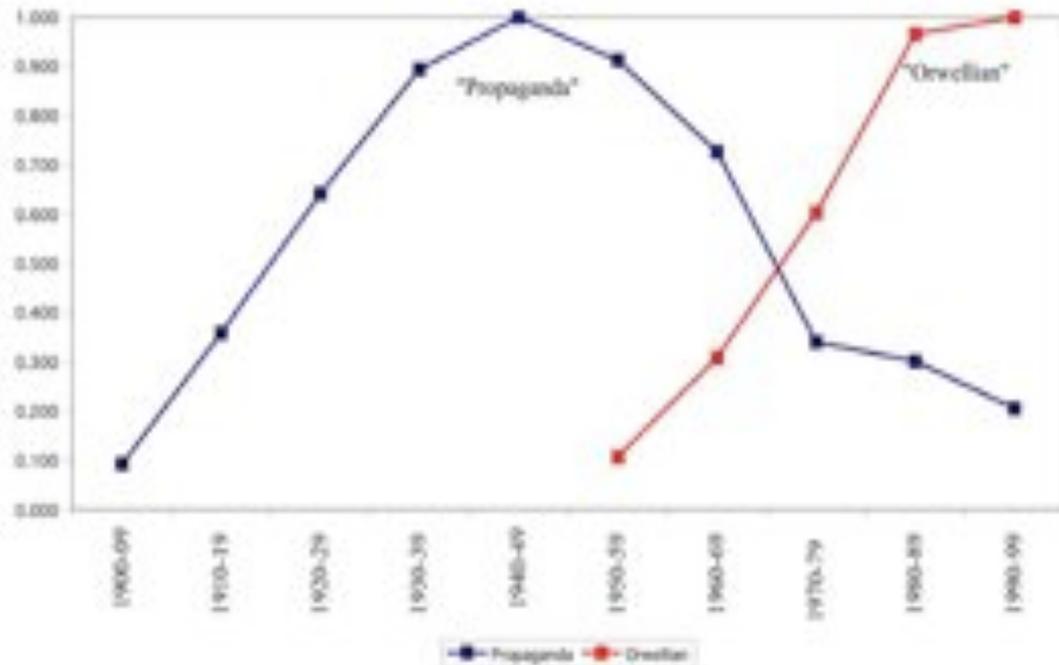
75 million booklets distributed, in multiple languages

“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



# The Rise of "Propaganda"

Average Annual Frequency of "Propaganda" and "Orwellian" in *The New York Times*, by Decade





# After WWI: The birth of the press agent

## Rise of publicists, press services.



Edward Bernays

“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. ...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

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. .

Edward Bernays, 1928

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

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



## Propaganda in WWII

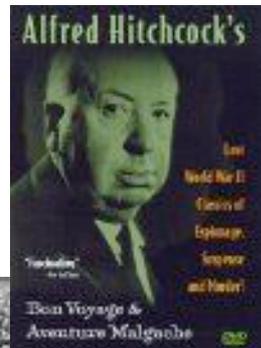
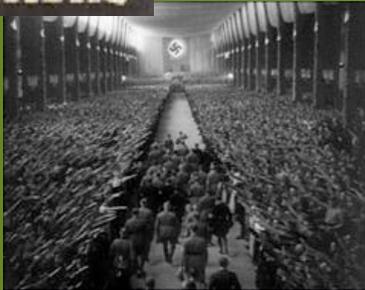
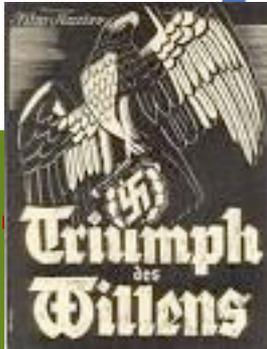


Frank Capra and  
George C. Marshall

Adoption of propaganda techniques by Roosevelt during WWII:  
"Office of Facts and Figures" --> Office of War Information

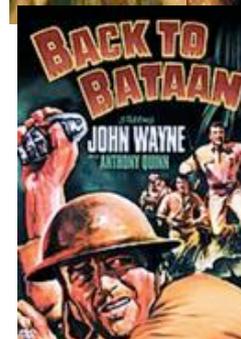
"the office is not a propaganda agency... We don't believe in this country in artificially stimulated, high-pressure, doctored nonsense." NYC Mayor Fiorello La Guardia

The object is "to provide the public with sugar-coated, colored, ornamental matter, otherwise known as 'bunk.'" La Guardia, letter to FDR



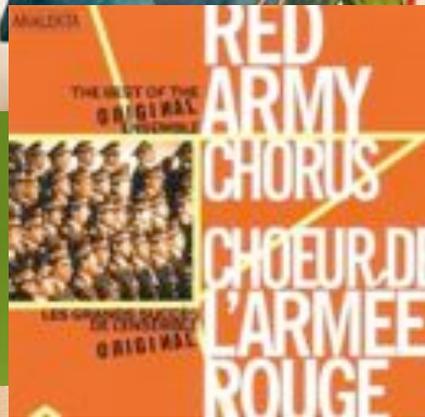
# The Propaganda Film

"The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most men's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture." Elmer Davis, director of the Office of War Information



# Postwar Propaganda

By the 1950's, "propaganda" suggests crude or blatant efforts at persuasion.





# Informing the public

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# Is informed public deliberation possible?

The press as medium? (OED: "A person or thing which acts as an intermediary")

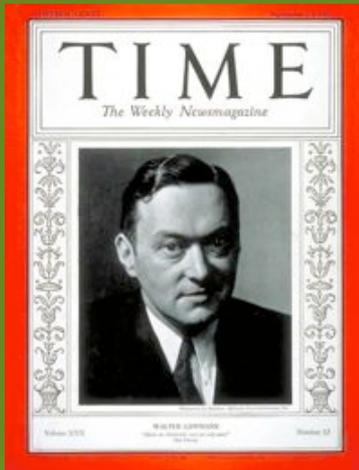
The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so fast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complex indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown.

We have the physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common.

Without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless... Communication alone can create a great community. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*



# The "informed citizen": The Lippmann-Dewey Debate



1922: In *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippman argues that the functions of modern democracy cannot rest on the idea of an "informed public"

The diffusion of information impeded by structural barriers:  
"artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meagre time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world..."

And by psychological barriers:

"[humans] are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it."

"The facts far exceed our curiosity"



# The "informed citizen": The Lippmann-Dewey Debate

Lippmann on the role of symbols:

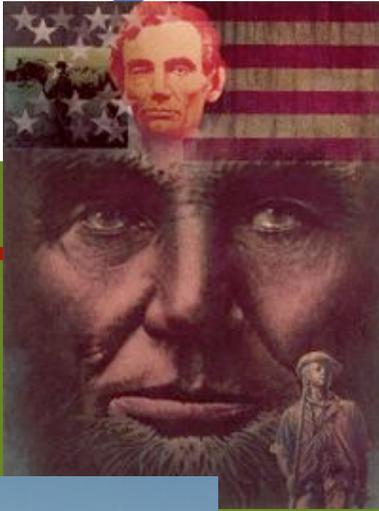
The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which detach emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.

Democracy is essentially plebicitary: the public can only say "yes" or "no." Policy decisions must be left to experts.

Cf V. O. Key: "The voice of the people is but an echo.

Dewey: Democracy is both a means and an end:

Democracy is not an alternative to the other principles of associative life. It is the idea of community life itself. (*The Public and its Problems*, 1927)





# Is "objectivity" possible?

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# Reactions to Objectivity

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Emergence of the daily columnist

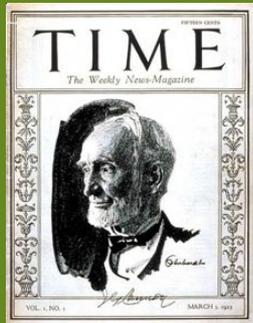
Attacks on “objectivity” from the left

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



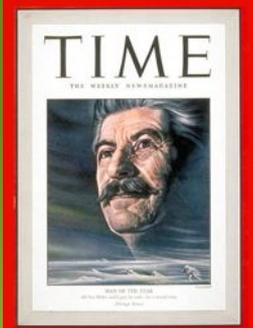
# Reactions to Objectivity



The rise of “interpretive journalism”

Birth of *Time* magazine, 1923; 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



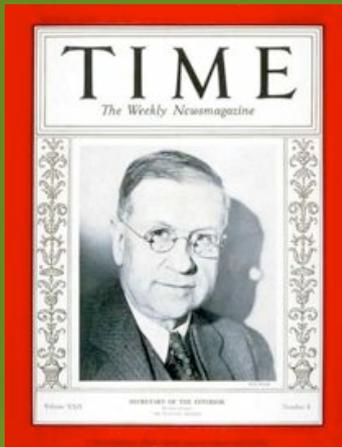


# The Shifting Meaning of "Bias"

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

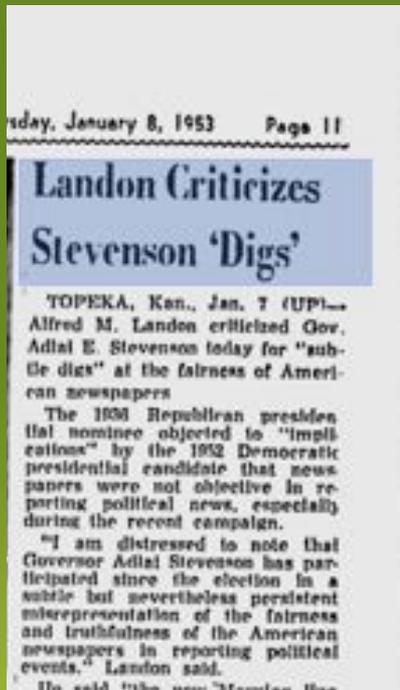
"The American press is not free.... because of its own financial and economic tie-ups [instead of] what it should be, a free servant of a free democracy."

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

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## Bias is inescapable

[M]embers of the media argued that 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?

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"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



## 3/20 readings: Advertising

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### Required reading:

McKendrick, Neil. 1982. "Josiah Wedgwood and the Commercialization of the Potteries," pp. 100-145 in McKendrick et al. *Birth of a Consumer Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (in reader)

Johnson, Samuel. 1761. [On Advertising], *The Idler* 40 (Jan 20): 224-229. (online)

### Additional material:

Klein, Naomi. 2000. part I from *No Logo* (online)

Wedgwood Museum (online)