Information, Objectivity, and Propaganda

History of Information 103
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Agenda: 3/15

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

"Causes" of the revolution:

- Technological developments
- Increased literacy -- a “nation of readers”
- The democratization of business and politics

James Gordon Bennett

NY Herald, 1842
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)

Pitman Shorthand 1837

Foudrinier Machine, 1811
Rise of the mass press

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

Increasing political influence...

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

McClure’s: from 100k in 1895 to 500k in 1907
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"
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

"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.”
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*)
The Rise of "objectivity"
Localizing the news

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The emergence of "objectivity"
19th c. forces leading to rise of journalistic objectivity

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
"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"?

"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"?

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

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Lincoln Steffens on his years on the Post
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 price of "impartiality"

“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.”
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
Propaganda before "propaganda"
The Rise of “Propaganda”

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

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

1922: Encyclopedia Britannica first includes propaganda as entry
States begin to take a direct role in creating & diffusing pro-government views.
May, 1915: The Bryce Report "substantiates" allegations of German atrocities during invasion of Belgium.
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”
After WWI: 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. ...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

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 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
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 complexy 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 plebicipitory: 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?
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, 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.
"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)
Recent Attacks on Objectivity

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
"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

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

Additional material:
- Klein, Naomi. 2000. part 1 from *No Logo* (online)
- Wedgwood Museum (online)