

# The Rise and Fall of “Objectivity”\*

Geoff Nunberg

Quality of Information

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

# 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.

# 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

# The Features of Objectivity

- Truthfulness/Facticity/Accuracy

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

- Balance

- Nonpartisanship

"If people knew how I felt on an issue, I had failed in my mission" Walter Cronkite

- Detachment

- Form -- the inverted pyramid

**Mob Murders a Negro Official**

**Charleston, S. C.** In Lake City, a town of five hundred inhabitants, sixty miles north of here, an angry mob of from three to five hundred men lynched Frazer B. Baker, the negro Postmaster, his three-year-old daughter, early this morning, and wounded Baker's wife, two grown daughters, and a ten-year-old son. *New York Herald*, 1898

Objectivity prizes "information" over "story"

## Reactions to Objectivity: The rise of “Propaganda”

"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."

Creel Committee, "4-minute men," etc.

"Our effort was educational and informative throughout. No other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts." George Creel

Rise of publicists, press services.

"The development of the modern publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts... the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties." W. Lippman, Public Opinion, p 218

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." Fiorello La Guardia

"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 OWI

The fate of "propaganda" after WWII

# 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...

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

# Recent Attacks on Objectivity

"Bias" in earlier times is largely seen as a matter of "interest"

"The American press is not free. It is not -- because of its own financial and economic tie-ups -- what it should be, a free servant of a free democracy." Harold Ickes, 1940. Cites reports of elevator accidents in department stores, Gannett's ownership of utilities, etc.

New Attacks on "media bias" begin during Nixon years: Pat Buchanan threatens to bring anti-trust charges against networks that "freeze out opposing points of view and opposing information."



# Recent Attacks on Objectivity, cont.

Attacks gather strength in 1990's

Over first four years of Clinton presidency, press mentions of phrases like "liberal media bias" are three times more frequent than during the presidency of George H. Bush; outnumber mentions of "conservative media bias" by more than 20 to 1 (proportion rises to 30 to 1 by 2002).

"Bias" taken as matter of undisputed fact:

WSJ, 2002: media bias is "one of the facts of life so long obvious they would seem to be beyond dispute."

"Everybody knows that Dan Rather is an egomaniacal liberal. Everybody knows that the major news networks lean to the left. . . . Everybody knows that mainstream journalists see conservatives as 'biased,' 'ideological,' or 'agenda-driven.'" Jonah Goldberg, Nat. Review

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

# The new notion of “bias”

Charges of bias based on political affiliations of journalists:

Brent Bozell, Media Research Center: [M]embers of the media argued that while personally liberal, they are professionally neutral. ...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.”

Implications of this view:

Only remedy for bias is “balance”

Issue is views of journalists, not media owners

“Liberal bias in the news media is . . . not the result of a vast left-wing conspiracy; journalists do not meet secretly to plot how to slant their news reports.”

No valid distinction between opinion and “objective reporting” --

“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.

# Bias, Balance, and Blogs

2002 (or so) -- political blogs become a major force in political discourse

Unlike columnists, bloggers are (usually) detached from affiliations with newspapers or news institutions. Rather, exist in network of links...

Most (political) blogs are explicitly partisan.

Blogs function to mediate between "news sources" and "public opinion" -- perform interpretive function (despite occasional scoops)

Cf Blog "voice": the new syntax of public(?) discourse.

Does heterogeneity of the blogosphere provide a kind of "collaborative filtering" of political opinion?

Do blogs reinforce or reduce fragmentation of public sphere, or are they neutral?

Can blogs survive mainstreaming?

"Blogs, which sprang up to sass the establishment, have been overrun by the establishment. In a lame attempt to be hip, pols are posting soggy, foggy, bloggy musings on the Internet – spewing out canned meanderings in a genre invented by unstructured exhibitionists." Maureen Dowd



