Information, Objectivity & Propaganda

History of Information
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March 7, 2017
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Information, Objectivity & Propaganda

Week 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 10 11 12 13 14 15

2017 1980 1950 1900 1800 1700 1600 1200 600 400 0 500 3000 5000 30,000 50,000

UDACITY
Midterm Essay Option

Students who want to write an essay in lieu of taking the midterm must submit a proposal by March 14. We will let you know if you may proceed by March 17. The paper is due at 9:30 a.m. on the morning of the midterm (March 23).

Instructions are posted on Midterm Essay Guidelines page, linked from course home page.

Essay prompts will be posted this afternoon.
Objectivity, news, information, propaganda…

The first ”information revolution”

What makes for “news”?

Rise of the mass press:
  Story and Information

Separated at birth: objectivity and propaganda
  The creation of objectivity
  The rise of propaganda

Assignment: is objectivity possible?

Assignments: Marisa A., Becca B., Chloe C., Sam Z., Alexander Y.
Objectivity, propaganda, information, news...
Lewis Wallace, a former reporter for the public radio program Marketplace, was recently fired after he wrote a blog post called “Objectivity is dead, and I’m okay with it.” Wallace, a transgender man, said that as government officials shifted toward a “post-fact” worldview, it was impossible for responsible journalists to stay neutral.
Russia urged to ban 'Beauty and the Beast' remake over gay 'propaganda'

One person’s news…

How New York’s Top Advertisers Are Fighting Terrorist Propaganda

How Anti-Democratic Propaganda Is Taking Over the World

Times presents ‘news’ that’s just propaganda for Bam

The Joys of Propaganda

Trump’s Use of Navy SEAL’s Wife Highlights All the Key Ingredients of U.S. War Propaganda
"The First Information Revolution"
Also: Wood-pulp paper
Newspaper folding machine.
Telegraph...

c. 1454 Gutenberg

c. 1460: Roman type

c. 1720 - 1780: invention of stereotype
1814: steam press
1847: rotary press
1886: Mergenthaler Linotype
1887: Monotype
1892: process color printing
1902: offset lithography
"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

- Rise in literacy
- Democratization of commerce & political life
- Urbanization and the urban experience
Defining “the News”

Irwin:
Change (the unexpected)
Drama (conflict)
Gossip…

Cf Lindbergh kidnapping (1932)
“Biggest story since the Resurrection” (H. L. Mencken)
Prioritizing "the News"

A "natural hierarchy" of importance?

- plane crashes > winter furnace breakdowns
- crimes of rich criminals > crimes of poor criminals
- breakthroughs in science > breakthroughs in auto repair
- business news > labor news

(from Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News*)

Who is this man?
“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.” Posting in a London newsroom.

Parents sue zoo, city in fatal tiger attack

The parents of a San Jose teenager who was mauled to death by a Siberian tiger at the San Francisco Zoo last Christmas Day sued the city and the zoo Tuesday, saying zoo officials ignored warnings that the walls of the tiger's enclosure were dangerously low.
Rise of the mass press: Story and Information
Rise of the mass press

The World, the Journal-American; "yellow journalism"
Going graphic

Sunday rotogravure, cartoons, women’s features, comics
"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 Search by Brutal Spaniards While Under Our Flag

NY Journal, 2/12/1897
"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
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
"these narrow ways diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruit as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors have counterparts at home and all the world over."
Charles Dickens, *American Notes* 1842

"La moitié du monde ne sait pas comment l'autre vit" Rabelais

Jacob Riis: *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890
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

"All the news that’s fit to print."
“it does not soil the breakfast cloth"
The sources of "objectivity"
Sources of “objectivity”

Science: Statistics & quantitative methods, new tools of observation

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

photography “A daily photograph of the day's events." Charles Dana

Modern journalism, professionalization, circulation-based models, wire services etc.
The birth of data science

Science: Statistics & quantitative methods, new tools of observation

The rise of statistical thinking

1820-1840: “An avalanche of printed numbers” Ian Hacking

Magis: Statistics, Madame, is a modern and positive science. It sheds light on even the most obscure facts. Thus recently, thanks to laborious research, we now know the exact number of widows that crossed the Pont Neuf during 1860.

Desambois: This is prodigious. And how many?

Magis: Thirteen thousand, four hundred and ninety eight, plus one doubtful case.

Paris Vaudeville 1861:
Wire services

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 dispatches are merely dry matters of facts and detail. AP Washington bureau chief, 1866

Facts, facts piled up to the point of dry certitude, that was what the American people really wanted.” Roy Stannard Baker

privileges "information" over "story"
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*

Neutrality/nonpartisanship:

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

...  
NY Herald, 4/15/1865
Balance etc. presume a common perspective

Cf. Daniel Hallin on “spheres” of public discourse

Cf changing status of “homosexual gay same-sex marriage”
"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
The Age 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. Will Irwin, Propaganda and the News
“When [Roland] speaks to the populace he can no longer be direct. … Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes agitation, sometimes effervescence, sometimes excess.…” Edmund Burke, 1794
May, 1915: The Bryce Report "substantiates" allegations of German atrocities during invasion of Belgium.
America’s change of heart
Making the world “safe for democracy” 1917
Mastering propaganda: 1914-1917

WWI: Creel Committee:

“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

Poster by James Montgomery Flagg
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
The Propaganda Film

Leni Riefenstahl, Triumph of the Will, 1935
The Propaganda Film
The Propaganda Film

Determined to avoid a two-front war, Germany halted her drive to the east and turned west to first crush Britain and France.

Frank Capra, Why We Fight
Postwar Propaganda

By the 1950's, "propaganda" suggests crude or blatant efforts at persuasion.
Is "objectivity" possible?
One media critic has suggested that it is not possible to draw a line between “objective” reporting and opinion or propaganda:

[M]embers of the media [argue] 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.

Of the two writers you have read, Schudson and Irwin, which would find this point of view more plausible? If this is true, what distinguishes news reporting from propaganda? Reading both discussions, does it seem to you that reporting has grown more objective since Irwin’s time?

LEFT OR RIGHT?
Irwin demonstrates the lack of objectivity in reporting through the power structures of the war era: “news” as propaganda was a weapon, a range of well-crafted lies from both sides (i.e. the German story about President Wilson’s daughter and her bastard Spanish child, etc.) whether intended to drive a wedge between alliances or boost morale (Irwin 187)…News distribution is dependent on intent, and It’s the intent that separates reporting from propaganda; as well as the degree of veracity. …By the shift away from partisan press, etc. reporting today is objective relative to Irwin’s time (Schudson 79). However, there will always be some bias in news: even the unequal representation of certain minorities groups (blacks, women, and outsiders to the press) in news detracts from complete objectivity (Schudson 87).
Irwin’s discussion of the rise of propaganda during the time of World War I … more aligns with the notion about how propaganda and the news have developed an entangled relationship. Schudson … also describes the turbulent history of journalism and the inherent struggle journalists have faced to adhere to the objective principles put into place by the 1920s. According to these principles—otherwise known as the "Canons of Journalism"—proper news reporting is described as sincere, truthful, impartial, and accurate. … In contrast, propaganda is biased, untruthful, and censors important information from the public sphere. … Schudson’s account of the aftermath in journalism following the exposure of the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal exemplified a clear shift in journalism philosophy to truly begin to adhere to these original principles. Thus, although not a perfect craft, journalism has indeed become more objective since Irwin’s time.
The notion that journalists cannot avoid constantly making subjective decisions is in line with Irwin's direct statement that “there is no such thing as purely objective reporting. To have interest, any story must be written from a point of view” (Irwin 122). That ... is precisely where the idea of objective reporting breaks down. In what feels like a throwaway line, Schudson writes that in the late 20th-century US, “news about women, blacks, and others outside the narrow vision of the establishment press continued to be neglected” (Schudson 87), a nasty trend which... intrinsically supported the notion that minorities were objectively less important by not reporting on them. ... while it's tempting to divide journalism and propaganda by intentionality, making that distinction on the basis of whether the story... is slanted deliberately or by subconscious biases doesn't necessarily matter to its impact ... While he wrote that a reporter “cannot escape the national habit of thought” in regard to the World War, Irwin may as well have been writing about institutionalized racism, misogyny, cissexism, et al., which endure today.
I believe both Schudson and Irwin would ...agree that journalists cannot be completely objective. Journalists can still attempt to be unbiased, though, which is much closer to true, objective reporting than is propaganda, which, according to Irwin, “[i]n loose, popular usage... meant the next thing to a damned lie” (Irwin, pg. 3). He goes on to associate propaganda with national aims and governmental agendas.

Schudson [says that] reporting has gotten more objective over the years. As capitalism blossomed in America, “the concentration of power in a small number of private, profit-making news organizations centralized cultural authority and clamped down on the free flow of expression” (Schudson, pg. 66), creating news, but not objective news. By 1922-23, the American Society of Newspaper Editors “adopted a code of ethics called the ‘Canons of Journalism’ that included a principle of ‘sincerity, truthfulness, [and] Accuracy’ and another of ‘Impartiality.’” They felt “[n]ews reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind.” (Schudson, pg. 82). Today, because news is so confusing, journalists “[take] it for granted that this understanding [has] nothing to do with party or partisan sentiment” (Schudson, pg. 84).
Modern press should be viewed in terms of warfare, something that the Germans realized after WWI according to Irwin: “Warfare was no longer a fight between professional champions with peoples standing as mere spectators. Every resource, human and material, must be thrown into the scale” (149). News organizations like CNN, Fox News, or RT (Russia’s English News Channel) justify their country’s actions by reporting favorably for their side. Immediately, actions within Syria such as a bombing of a city are spinned to show the Russians as aggressors on American media, whereas RT reports the Russians as saviors of the Syrian people. Since we barely see the news from any other part of the world, we believe that what we view on our media as the objective truth, even though around the world, different “objective truths” are being promoted by either government-sponsored media like RT or tabloids meant to make profit like the Daily Mail in the UK. …
What does objectivity require?
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

“interpretive journalism”

_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
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 dept store elevator accidents, Gannett's opposition to public ownership of utilities, etc.
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)
"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.
Informing the public
Is informed public deliberation possible?

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

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*
Rise 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 Lippmann, 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
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. …*The facts far exceed our curiosity*"
The "informed citizen":
The Lippmann-Dewey Debate

Lippmann on democracy:

Democracy is essentially plebiscitory: the public can only say "yes" or "no."

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)