The Photographic Truth

History of Information 103
Geoff Nunberg

March 16, 2017
Section A: Identify and explain the relevance to the history of information of the following.

Socrates:
5th c. BC Greek philosopher who invented the Socratic method and laid the groundwork for Western philosophy and logic…
Section A: Identify and explain the relevance to the history of information of the following.

Socrates:
5th c. BC Greek philosopher who invented the Socratic method and laid the groundwork for Western philosophy and logic...

Greek philosopher. In the Phaedrus he set out several arguments against writing: one cannot enter into a dialectic with the written word; writing degrades memory and gives people a superficial acquaintance with a subject.... etc. (But he owned a lot of books.) (42 wds)
The Impact of Photography
Agenda, 3/16

Why photography?
  Photography as a technology
  photography and information

“Inventing” photography

The photographic "truth"
  Documenting war
  Manipulating the photographic truth

Photography as documentation
  Fixing identities
  Documenting the deviant
  Representing the forgotten

(What's left out: photography as art, popular form, scientific tool, etc.)
The Range of "Photography"

Things we count as “photography”....
The Range of “Photography”

Things we don’t (usually) count as photography
What defines a "technology"? Features of use, distribution, markets etc.
What makes a "technology"?

How many technologies?

- telegraphy
- broadcast
- Photography
Inventions, Technologies, Applications, Media

"pre-photography"
Nièpce, Dauguerre, Talbot, Archer, etc.
Collodion, dry plate...
Photolithography, color, phototelegraphy, digital, etc.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Inventions technologies applications media

Official records
Photожournalism/documentary
"Art" photography
Consumer photography
Scientific use
Surveillance, military, forensic, etc.

Newspapers, magazines
Cartes de visite, snapshots, commemorative, advertising, porn, fashion etc.
Micro-photography etc.
Multiple Influences

- Market forces
- Photographic & printing technology
- Ideological background
- Public attitudes
- Cultural & political setting

Documentary photography

- Mass press
- Magazines
- Books & expositions
"Only on looking back, fifty years later, at his own figure in 1854, and pondering on the needs of the twentieth century, he wondered whether, on the whole, the boy of 1854 stood nearer to the thought of 1904, or to that of the year 1 ... Before the boy was six years old [i.e., 1844] he had seen four impossibilities made actual—the ocean-steamer, the railway, the electric telegraph, and the Daguerreotype."

--Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* [1905]
Modern Marvels

“... the ocean-steamer, the railway, the electric telegraph, and the Daguerreotype.”
Photography and Information

Photography influences the conception of information:

**Directly**: Seems to present the world "as it is," independent of human interpretation or intervention.

**Indirectly**: Provides a model or metaphor for "objective" representation of all sorts.
Picturing the Adamses

John
John Quincy
Charles
Francis
Henry
Photography Before Photographs

Why photography?
Photography as a technology
photography and information

“Inventing” photography
The photographic "truth"
Documenting war
Manipulating the photographic truth

Photography as documentation
Fixing identities
Documenting the deviant
Representing the forgotten
Photography Before Photographs

The camera obscura: images from nature

Ibn al-Hatham
965-1039
Photography Before Photographs

The camera lucida

silhouettes
Photography Before Photographs

Lenses and mirrors -- an old masters' "cheat"?

Detail from Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait, 1434
1725: Johann Heinrich Schulze demonstrates that silver compounds are visibly changed by the action of light.

1800: Thomas Wedgwood makes images on leather impregnated with silver nitrate, but is unable to prevent progressive darkening.

1819: Sir John Herschel discovers that sodium hyposulfite ("hypo") will dissolve silver halides, can be used to "fix" photographic prints.
Creating a permanent image: Invention by committee

1725: Johann Heinrich Schulze demonstrates that silver compounds are visibly changed by the action of light; makes stencil impressions on glass, but does not try to capture images from nature.

1800: Thomas Wedgwood makes images on leather impregnated with silver nitrate, but is unable to prevent progressive darkening.

1819: Sir John Herschel discovers that sodium hyposulfite ("hypo") will dissolve silver halides, can be used to "fix" photographic prints.

Inventions—the name by which we call devices that seem fundamentally new—are almost always born out of a process that is more like farming than magic. From a complex ecology… that includes the condition of the intellectual soil, the political climate, the state of technical competence… the suggestion of new possibilities arises.

…After many incremental successes and nominal failures a new idea… gains a measure of success that lifts it over the threshold into visibility, at which point it is given a name and begins its official history.

John Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now*
The earliest photographs

1826: Nicéphore Niépce makes "heliograph" on plate from window in Gras

1837: Louis Daguerre announces in 1837 a new "chemical and physical process" which "is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; it gives her the ability to reproduce herself.”

Daguerre’s first surviving image, 1835
The earliest photographs

1835: William Henry Fox Talbot invents "photogenic drawing": method of printing on paper, later the calotype, which makes use of latent image, permitting 1-3 min exposures.

“…how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper.”

First negative—latticed window 1835

“Mousetrap camera”  Lacock Abbey
The brief, happy reign of the Daguerreotype

By 1840’s Daguerreotype becomes "the mirror with a memory" (Oliver Wendell Holmes)
The brief, happy reign of the Daguerreotype

In a mobile and transient society concerned with preserving stable images of personal identity, a photographic likeness… held a powerful appeal…. Daguerreotype portraits quickly became a staple item of postal exchange…. The unique daguerreotype image was both a bodily relic and an intimate epistle in its own right. David Henkin, *The Postal Age*
During this lamentable period, a new industry arose which contributed not a little to confirm stupidity in its faith and to ruin whatever might remain of the divine in the French mind. The idolatrous mob demanded an ideal worthy of itself and appropriate to its nature... A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. ... From that moment our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal.
Photographic Fame

Victor Hugo

Sarah Bernhardt

Lincoln, by Brady

Cartes de visite, Victoria, Dickens

The photographic truth

Why photography?
  Photography as a technology
  photography and information
“Inventing” photography
The photographic truth
  Documenting war
Manipulating the photographic truth
Photography as documentation
  Fixing identities
Documenting the deviant
Representing the forgotten
Establishing Remote Presence

Representing elsewhere symbolically or iconically

Writing, print, telegraphy, postal service etc.;
also painting, engraving, etc.

Extending virtual presence

Photography, telephony, cinema, radio, television

Why do photographs seem more truthful than other kinds of pictures? One of the most intuitive explanations… is that the photograph… has a direct relationship to the thing it represents. This relationship has been called “indexical”… a sign that has a causal connection to the thing it represents, such as smoke to a fire…. Mia Fineman, *Faking It*
In truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more accurate truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.

E. A. Poe, 1839
The photographic truth

1838: Daguerre, photograph of rue du Temple,
The photograph as a model for journalistic objectivity

“The Sun ... will endeavour to present its daily photograph of the whole world’s doings in the most luminous and lively manner.” Charles Dana

The *New York Herald* is now the representative of American manners, of American thought. It is the daily daguerreotype of the heart and soul of the model republic. London *Times*, 1848
We regard the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so on) depicted there.

This need not have been so. We could easily imagine people who did not have this relation to such pictures. Who, for example, would be repelled by photographs, because a face without color and even perhaps a face in reduced proportions struck them as inhuman.

The Photographic Document: War Photography

Why photography?
  Photography as a technology
  photography and information
“Inventing” photography
The photographic truth

  Documenting war
Manipulating the photographic truth
Photography as documentation
  Fixing identities
Documenting the deviant
Representing the forgotten
Crimea: The First “Reported” War

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred....
Alfred Tennyson

Oct 25, 1854: Charge of the Light Brigade (Richard Caton Woodville, Jr.)
Sidebar: capturing gaits

Oct 25, 1854: Charge of the Light Brigade (Richard Caton Woodville, Jr.)

Eadweard Muybridge 1878
Crimea: The First Photographed War

1854-55: Wm. Howard Russell reports for *Times* from Crimea on incompetence of general staff, lack of supplies, etc., sending dispatches by telegraph.

1855: Roger Fenton sent to Crimea to take photos to counter Russell’s *Times* reports.
Lo! in that house of misery
   A lady with a lamp I see
Pass through the glimmering gloom,
   And flit from room to room.
H. W. Longfellow, 1857

Florence Nightingale, “The Lady with the Lamp,” 1951
Sidebar: The Lady with the Lamp

Polar Chart by Frances Nightingale 1858

Pie Chart by Wm Playfair, Statistical Breviary” 1801

Florence Nightingale, “The Lady with the Lamp”
Photographing the Civil War

Matthew Brady

Union batteries at Fredricksburg, VA

"Mr Brady has brought home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war."
"If war could be photographed in all its monstrous actuality ... that would be a great deterrent for war." Edward Steichen

Photographs as Symbols

Robert Capa 1936

Joe Rosenthal, 1945

Yvgeny Khaldei 1945
Photographs as Symbols

Yvgeny Khaldei 1945
The Vietnam Narrative

Eddie Adams 1968

Nick Ut 1972
Manipulating Photographic “Truth”

…the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify. Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph. Lewis Hine

Why photography?
Photography as a technology
photography and information
“Inventing” photography
The photographic truth
Documenting war
Manipulating the photographic truth
Photography as documentation
Fixing identities
Documenting the deviant
Representing the forgotten
“[Alexander] Gardner’s dead sharpshooter, his long rifle gleaming by his side, is not imagined. This man lived; this is the spot where he fell; this is how he looked in death… If we had been there, we would have seen it so…. We have been shown again and again that …subjects can be misrepresented, distorted, faked… but this knowledge cannot shake our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record.” Beaumont Newhall
Manipulating Photographic Truth

“We have been shown again and again that this is pure illusion. Subjects can be misrepresented, distorted, faked… but this knowledge cannot shake our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record.”
1871: Paris Commune: Photographs of executions by communards are doctored to change identity of victims.
Doctoring the Truth

Mao Zedong and Bo Gu (l.), 1936
Rewriting history
Modern alterations: Aesthetic choices?

Pulitzer Prize winning photo by John Filo, Kent State, 1970
Are we more sophisticated about photographs now?

“Digital photography and Photoshop have taught us to think about photographic images in a different way—as potentially manipulated images with a strong but always mediated resemblance to the things they depict.” Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop*
“Are we more sophisticated about photographs now?

“Digital photography and Photoshop have taught us to think about photographic images in a different way—as potentially manipulated images with a strong but always mediated resemblance to the things they depict.” Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop*

Why does anybody ever believe what they see in a photograph?
Photography as Documentation

Why photography?
- Photography as a technology
- Photography and information

“Inventing” photography

The photographic truth
- Documenting war

Manipulating the photographic truth

**Photography as documentation**
- Fixing identities
- Documenting the deviant
- Representing the forgotten
Documenting the Criminal

Creating the mug shot

"Bank book" prepared for bank clients by Pinkerton Detective Agency, ca. 1875

Entry for 13-year-old "vagrant," San Joaquin County Jail, ca. 1900

Wanted poster for Butch Cassidy
Lombroso: Hereditary criminals are identified by large jaws, handle-shaped ears, shifty eyes, etc.

The criminal is "an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals."

Cesare Lombroso
"... the imaginative power even of the highest artists is far from precise, and... no two artists agree in any of their typical forms. The merit of the photographic composite is its mechanical precision, being subject to no errors beyond those incidental to all photographic productions." Francis Galton
Eugenics and Photography

"My general object has been to take note of the varied hereditary faculties of different men, and of the great differences in families and races, to learn how far history may have shown the practicability of supplanting the human stock by better strains, and to consider whether it might not be our duty to do so by such efforts as may be reasonable, thus exerting ourselves to further the ends of evolution more rapidly and with less distress than if events were left to their own course.” Francis Galton
Photography as an instrument of social control

Truth before all. The more pity I felt at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, the more impossible it becomes for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as we are. 1846
Representing the forgotten

Why photography?
   Photography as a technology
   photography and information
“Inventing” photography
The photographic truth
   Documenting war
Manipulating the photographic truth
Photography as documentation
   Fixing identities
   Documenting the deviant

Representing the forgotten
...It is for these Servants of the Common Good to educate and direct public opinion.... I wonder, sometimes, what an enterprising manufacturer would do if his wares, instead of being inanimate things, were the problems and activities of life itself... Would he not grasp eagerly at such opportunities to play upon the sympathies of his customers as are afforded by the camera? Lewis Hine

"Some boys and girls were so small they had to climb up on to the spinning frame to mend broken threads and to put back the empty bobbins."
Documenting the forgotten
Documenting the forgotten

Photography and the awakening of social conscience

Jacob Riis: *How the Other Half Lives*

Lithograph prepared from Riis photo
Documenting the forgotten

Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, Farm Security Administration, mid-1930s

Lange, photos of Dust Bowl

The effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
In sum

Photography is a “technology” defined by market forces, public attitudes, social functions & technical/scientific bases

Photography was “invented” by many people over many years

Photography provides a model for objectivity & “truthfulness” despite its manipulability

Photography has been used to classify “deviants” and enforce social control—but also to raise social consciousness and illuminate society’s margins.
Readings for March 21

21 March: Computer "Revolution"

Watch: Entire video.

This twelve-minute video will introduce you to Babbage and Lovelace. Meanwhile, you can think of Lardner as the Graham-Cumming of his day.

Read: All

Read: "Introduction," pp. 263 to the break on 285, to get a sense of how the Difference Engine worked and how it was seen by contemporaries.

Lovelace, Ada. 1852. "Notes by the Translator" to L.F. Menabrea, "On Babbage's Analytic Engine."
Read: beginning of "Note G", pp 722 to the end of point 6 on page 723, to get a sense both of the Analytical Engine and of Lovelace's insight.

No assignment