



UC Berkeley School of Information

Information, Objectivity, and Propaganda

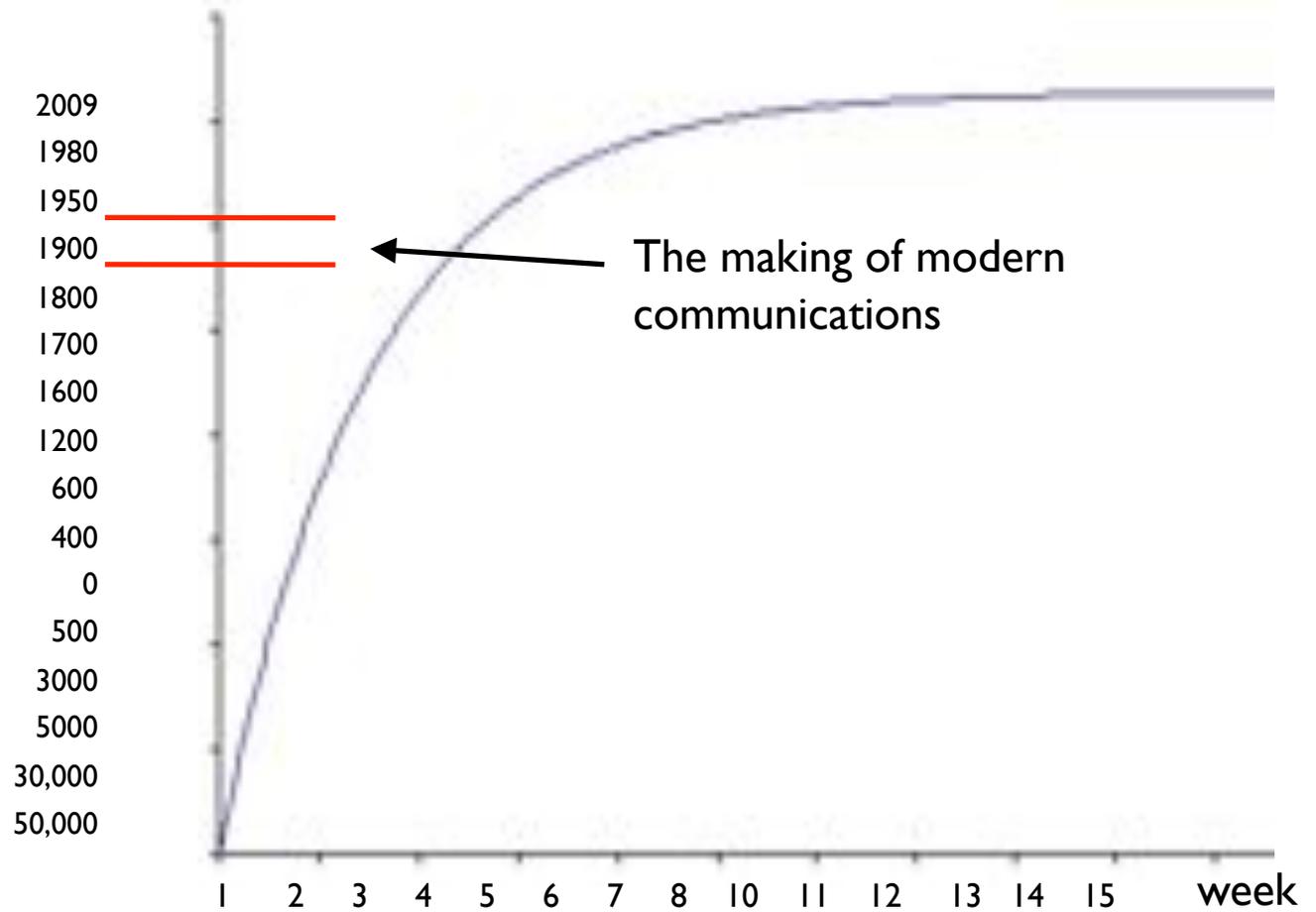


History of Information 103
Geoff Nunberg

March 29, 2010



where we are





Itinerary, 3/29

The growth of mass communication: the supply side of literacy

The paradox of modern mass communications: "objectivity" and propaganda

The rise of the popular press

The creation of objectivity

The 20th century: propaganda comes of age

Propaganda and the "informed public"

Is "objectivity" possible?



"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



Rise of the Penny Newspaper



James Gordon
Bennett

"Causes" of the revolution:

Increased literacy -- a "nation of readers"

The democratization of business and politics



NY Herald, 1842



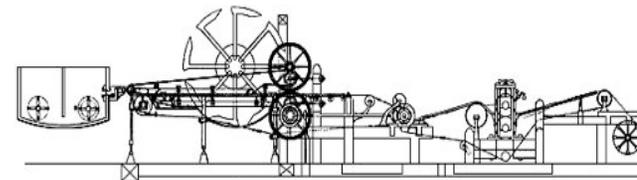
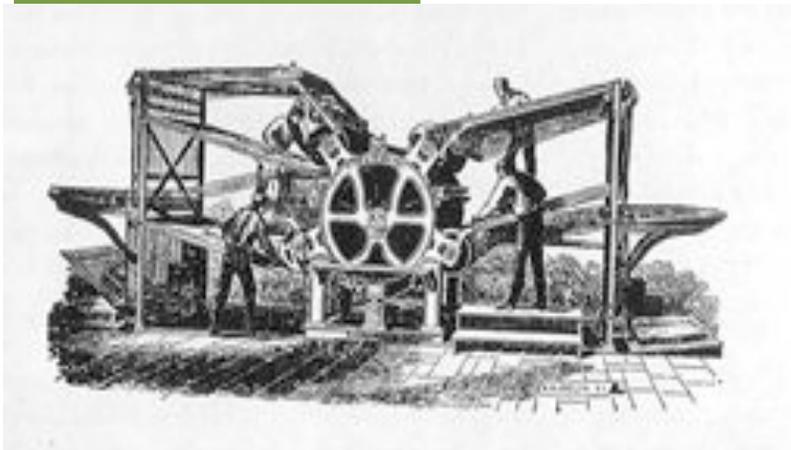


Rise of the Penny Newspaper

technological advances:

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

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



Foudrinier Machine, 1811



The Second Newspaper Revolution



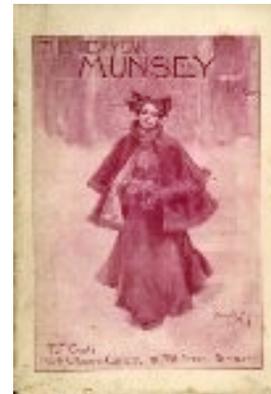
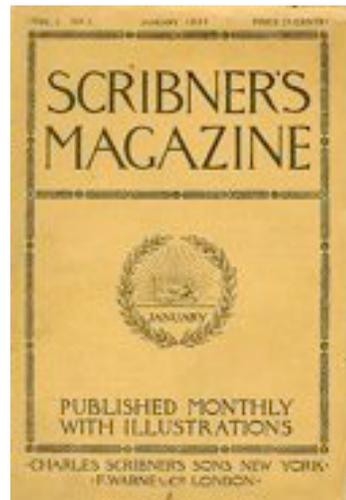
Joseph Pulitzer



Wm. Randolph Hearst

Major dailies: NY World, Journal reach circulations of ca. 500,000

Growth of magazines: from 100k subscribers in 1885 to 5.5 million in 1907





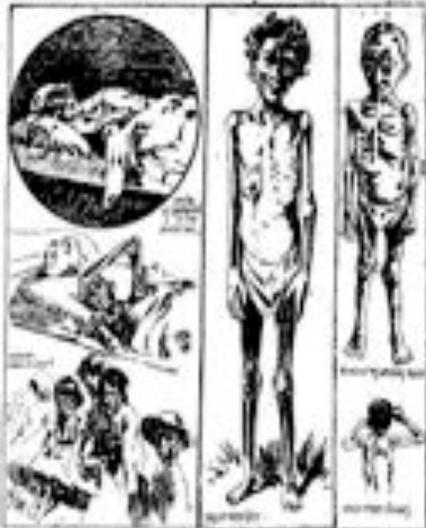
Political Influence of the Press

Increasing political influence...
Whipping up war fever: 1897

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

WHAT SENATOR PROCTOR SAW IN CUBA



SPANARDS SEARCH WOMEN ON AMERICAN STEAM





Political Influence of the Press

Whipping up war fever

"You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war" attrib. to William Randolph Hearst.



Frederic Remington



Richard Harding Davis



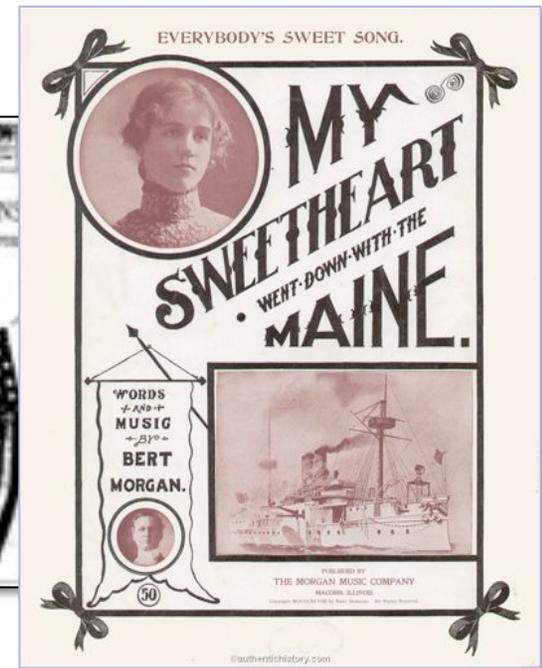
Stephen Crane

Political Influence of the Press



Whipping up war fever

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Frederic Remington



The Birth of "Muckraking"



Nellie Bly
(Elizabeth Cochran)



Ida Tarbell



Lincoln Steffens





The Birth of "Muckraking"



Jacob Riis:
How the Other Half Lives



The invention of "objectivity"



The "higher journalism"



1896: Adolph Ochs takes over the NY Times

Stresses "decency," reform, "respectability,"
"information" journalism

Publisher as a "vendor of information"

Circulation goes from 9000 to 350,000 in 1920



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 -- creation of
journalism courses & schools

The cult of science



19th c. forces leading to rise of "objectivity"

The rise of wire services

[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



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"



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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.

"the journalist's job consists of reporting something called 'news' without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way." Michael Schudson



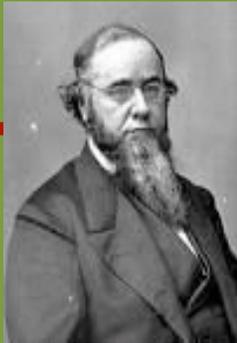
What makes for "objectivity"?

Neutrality/nonpartisanship:

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



Features of Objectivity



Edwin Stanton

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.

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...

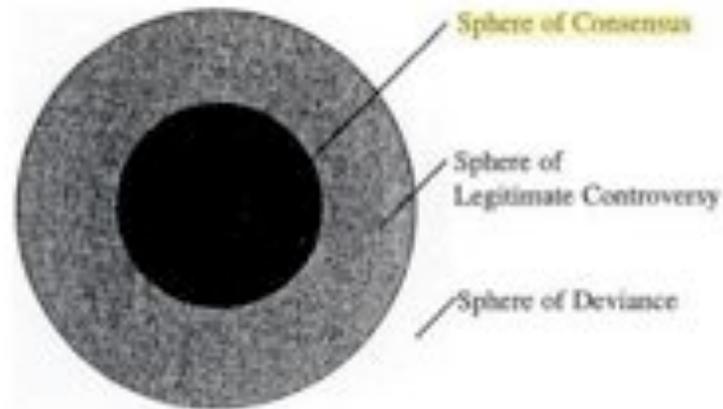
NY Herald, 4/15/1865



Features of Objectivity

Balance etc. presume a common perspective

Cf. Daniel Hallin on “spheres” of public discourse



Shifting status: slavery, votes for women, gay marriage, global warming?



The Rise of "Propaganda"



The Rise of “Propaganda”

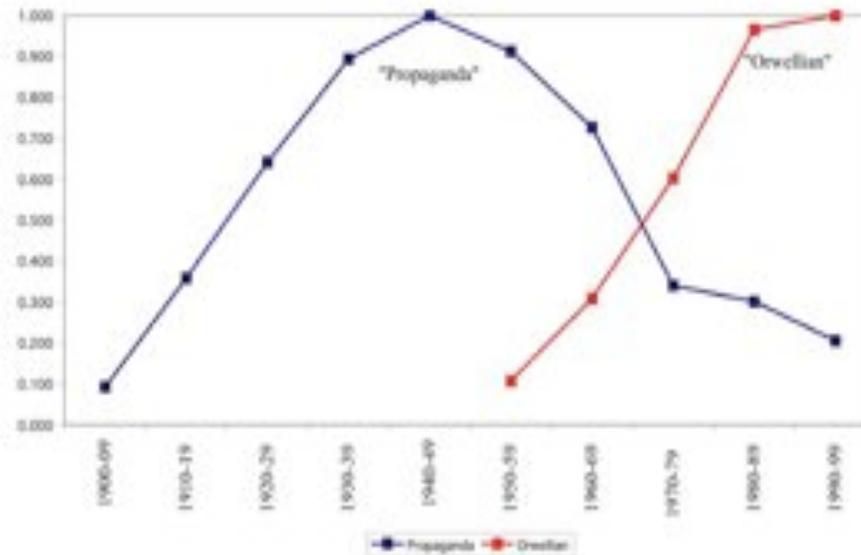
"Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning... Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmic aura." Will Irwin, *Propaganda and the News*

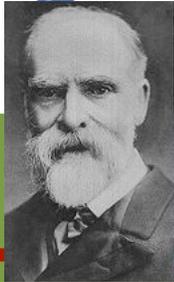
1922: Encyclopedia Britannica first includes *propaganda* as entry
States begin to take a direct role in creating & diffusing pro-government views.



The Rise of "Propaganda"

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





Vicount James Bryce, chairman of the German Outrages Inquiry Committee

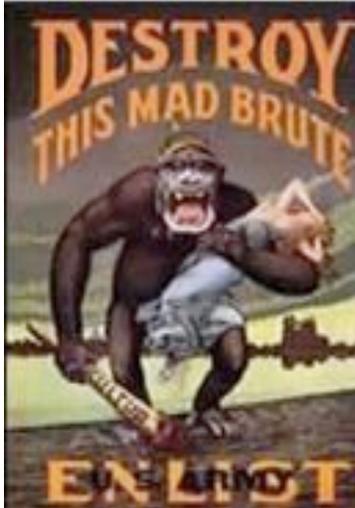
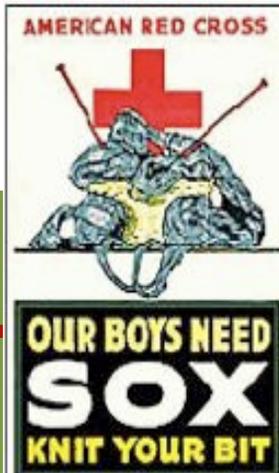
WWI British Propaganda

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



Lithograph by George Bellows, 1918

American Propaganda: 1917-1918



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



After the War: 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. 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.” Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 1922

Connection between propaganda, PR, & advertising.



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



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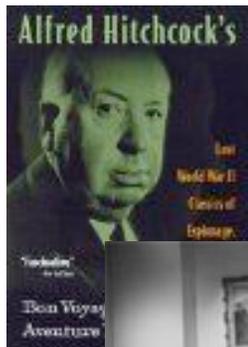
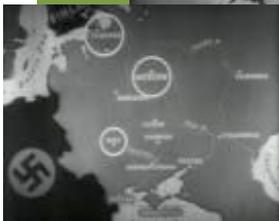
"the office is not a propaganda agency... We don't believe in this country in artificially stimulated, high-pressure, doctored nonsense." NYC Mayor Fiorello La Guardia

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





Race and Propaganda: the Axis...



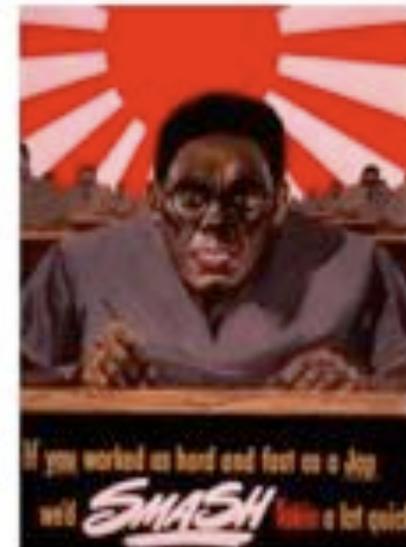
The Eternal Jew, German Poster, 1940



Italian Posters, 1944

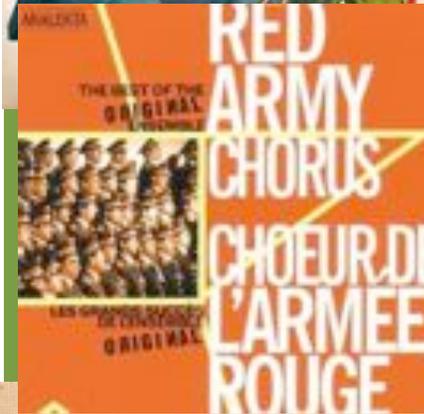


Race and Propaganda: The allies



Postwar Propaganda

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





The Case of "Infoganda"



2004: "Video News Releases" (VNR's) from the Office of National Drug Control Policy promote prescription drug program, w/ interviews of HHS sec. Tommy Thompson

2005: Revelation that Armstrong Williams accepted money to promote No Child Left Behind in his TV and radio programs

Frank Rich, Jon Stewart speak of 'infoganda'





The case of "Infoganda"

"It's propaganda no matter how you cut it." Bob Priddy, chairman of the Radio-Television News Directors Association

"Anyone who has questions about this practice needs to do some research on modern public information tools." HHS spokesperson



VNR from Leiner Health Products



WCBS (NYC) Newscast, 3/22/06



Informing the public



Is informed public deliberation possible?

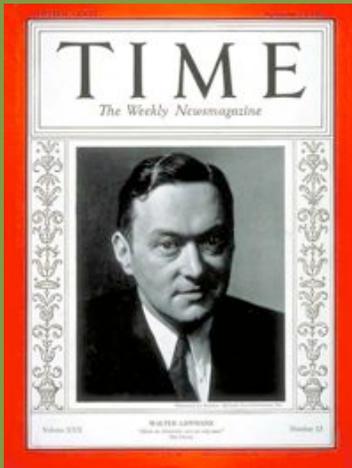
The press as medium? (OED: "A person or thing which acts as an intermediary")

The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so fast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly 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"

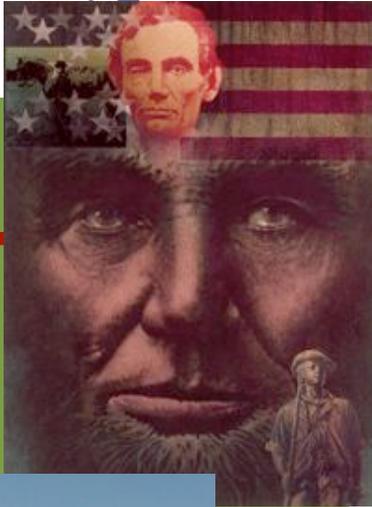
The diffusion of information impeded by structural barriers:
"artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meagre time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the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

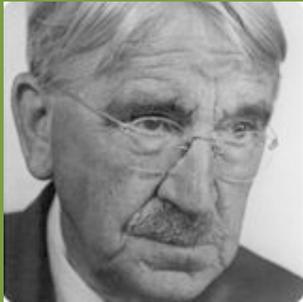
The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which detach emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.

Democracy is essentially plebiscitary: 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's Response to Lippmann



John 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)

The Great Society [must] become a Great Community; a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being...

Democracy as participatory, not simply plebicitary.



Is "objectivity" possible?



Reactions to Objectivity

Emergence of the daily columnist

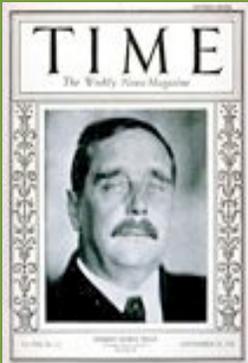
Attacks on “objectivity” from the left

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, 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

“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.



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



Recent Attacks on Objectivity, cont.

Attacks gather strength in 1990's

Over first four years of Clinton presidency, press mentions of "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 2006).



Is "Objectivity" an Illusion?

"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 blog



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.