The Dawn of the Information Age

Geoff Nunberg
History of Information: 10/4/06
The “ever-accelerating pace of change”

Results 1 - 100 of about 39,700 for "accelerating pace of change" OR "accelerating pace of technological change"
The “ever-accelerating pace of change”

Because everything in her home is waterproof, the housewife of 2000 can do her daily cleaning with a hose.
Looking for the Roots of "Modernity"
Looking for the Roots of "Modernity"
Looking for the Roots of "Modernity"
The Curve of "Modernity"
The Curve of "Modernity"

The March of Progress, II: The Pace of Social Change
The Dawn of the Information Age

19th century: The emergence of "news," "information" and "objectivity" as social categories, along with other modern categories.
"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 penny newspapers, "dime novels," etc.
"The First Information Revolution"

Libraries

Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731)

Town libraries (Boston, 1848; NY, 1849)

UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Later: Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

Causes of the revolution:

James Gordon Bennett

NY Herald, 1842
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

Causes of the revolution:

Technological advances:

- steam press,
- paper-making machines
- stereotypes
- rotary press invented by Richard Hoe, 1844; capable of 20k impressions/hr.
Rise of the Penny Newspaper

Causes of the revolution:

Growth of literacy

Note importance of working-class movement: cf Cobbett's *Political Register* in UK, which achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet)
The Second Newspaper Revolution

The World, the Journal-American; the birth of "yellow journalism"

Joseph Pulitzer

Wm. Randolph Hearst
The Birth of "Muckraking"

The connection to political Progressivism.

"In Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" you may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hand; 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 to himself the filth of the floor.

In "Pilgrim's Progress" the Man with the Muckrake is set forth as the example of him whose vision is fixed on carnal instead of on spiritual things. Yet he also typifies the man who in this life consistently refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing. Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing. … But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck-rake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces for evil. Theodore Roosevelt, 1906
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Nellie Bly
(Elizabeth Cochran)

Ida Tarbell

Lincoln Steffens

McClure's Magazine
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Upton Sinclair
The Birth of "Muckraking"

Jacob Riis:
How the Other Half Lives
Defining “the News”

Stories about developments in politics, world affairs, business, sports, natural disasters, accidents, crime, arts, science…

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 (editor of *le Figaro*, ca. 1850)

"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.
But cf other features that make stories "newsworthy" (from Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News*):

- plane crashes > winter furnace breakdowns
- incomes of rich criminals > incomes of poor criminals
- breakthroughs in science > breakthroughs in auto repair
- business news > labor news
Defining "the News"

Also:

Famous people > unknown people (even when the famous people's acts are unrelated to the reasons for their fame)

disappearing blondes > disappearing brunettes...
Easy to understand > hard to understand

Cf Chip Heath on spread of “Gore claims he invented the Internet”
News and the creation of imagined community

The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. --Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*

[Britain] has become a nation of readers. --Samuel Johnson, 1781
Properties of Information

Information is corpuscular (morselized), quantifiable, commoditized

Information is objective & transparent

The intelligence that came from afar ... possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to certification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' It is indispensable for information to sound plausible. (Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”)

Cf “Human information” vs. “human knowledge”

Information is public

"A letter from your old acquaintance, the housekeeper at the Grange," I answered.... She would gladly have gathered it up at this information, but Hareton beat her. (Wuthering Heights)

Cf “How much information is there in the world?”
The Phenomenology of Information

The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' It is indispensable for information to sound plausible.

Faith in "information" follows from the form of the document itself.
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
"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
Features of Objectivity

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

• Balance --
  “He said, she said” journalism

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

• Detachment

• Objectivity prizes "information" over "story"
Features of Objectivity

Form -- 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. The assassin immediately rushed to the bed and inflicted two or three stabs on the chest and two on the face. It is hoped the wounds may not be mortal.

NY Herald, 4/15/1865
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…

Lippmann’s proposal: Leave government to “a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality.”

“representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.”

Cf modern NAS, CBO, etc.
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
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.
[M]embers of the media argued that while personally liberal, they are professionally neutral. They argued 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
Language & Point of View

What makes for a 'regime'?
Language & Point of View

Descriptions of Voters in Major Newspapers, Past Ten Years
Race in Newspaper Voter Descriptions

- White Liberals
- White Democrats
- Black/Af-Am Liberals
- Black/Af-Am Democrats
- White Conservatives
- White Republicans
- Black/Af-Am Conservatives
- Black/Af-Am Republicans
"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

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, Al Franken)

"Objectivity" as collection of attitudes, ethical principles, stylistic guidelines, and professional practices, etc.