

Does (or Can) the News Media Uncover Truth?

Quote of the day:

“I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. . . . that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer.”

-- anthropologist Clifford Geertz, 1973

readings for next time

This segment of the course: truth-seeking institutions

Ones we're focusing on:

universities

science

media

Others:

research institutes such as think tanks

courts

bureaucratic agencies

decentralized dialogue and discussion

Today and next class: Does (or can) the news media uncover truth?

Relatedly: Is the media biased? If so, in what ways? Are some media sources more biased than others?

Questions of bias can be clarified if we distinguish, for any given media source, the matter of *which* stories to cover from *how* to cover them.

I will ground these questions historically by examining how the media in the U.S. has changed over the last three centuries.

17th-18th centuries: partisan press.
Published by a party or a person, intended to promote a viewpoint, not to make money.



19th century: rise of profit-seeking newspapers.
Served as a source of information for people's own community and the larger world.

Associated Press: a nonprofit consortium of journalists founded in 1846. Initial customers were five New York newspapers.

Owing to the cost savings it provided for newspapers, the Associated Press grew at end of 19th century. Its stories were not very partisan (wanted to sell to many different newspapers).



penny press: newspapers sold for pennies, starting in 1830s. Relied more on advertising, less on sales/subscriptions. Wanted to appeal to as large an audience as possible.

The penny press sought to attract an audience with interesting, engaging, and provocative stories. Needed to entice people to choose their publication over other alternatives, including whatever else people would do with their spare time.



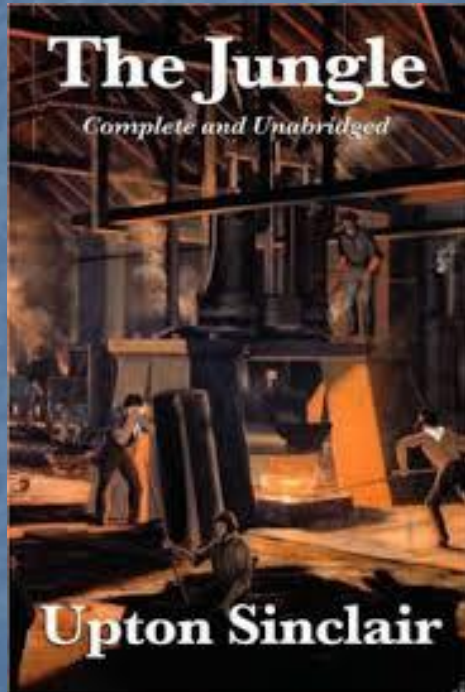
Practically speaking, stories that qualify as news (“newsworthy”), are the opposite of boring, with qualities such as:

- drama
- conflict
- easily personalized
- events rather than trends

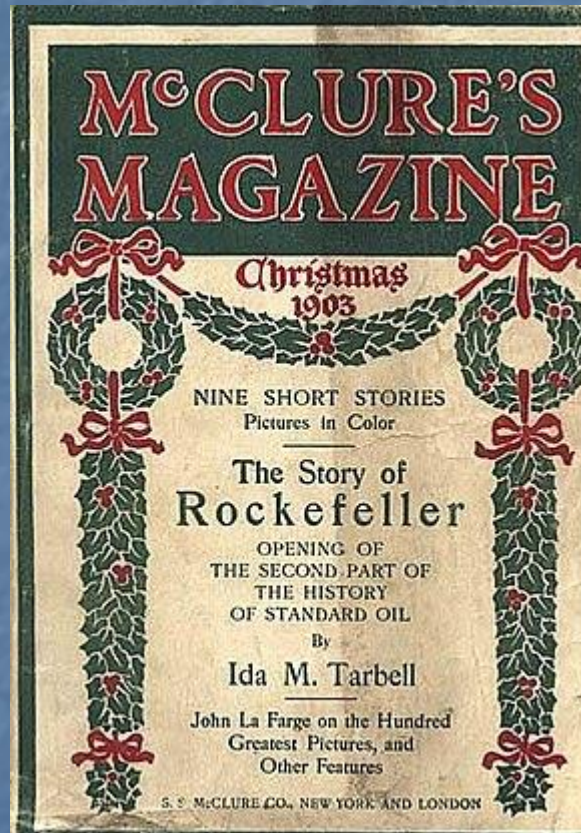
Although it's not a left-right bias, the criteria for newsworthiness are a bias with important implications for the pursuit of truth. Those criteria lead to a selective portrait of the world.



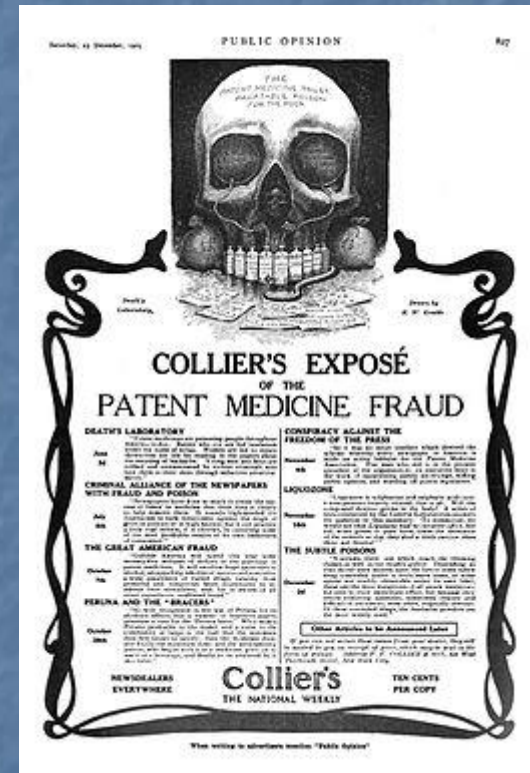
muckrakers: name for investigative journalists around turn of 20th century. Sold stories mostly to magazines. Investigated corruption, political machines, poverty, child labor, unsafe working conditions, and impure food and drugs.



Upton Sinclair



Ida Tarbell



Samuel Hopkins Adams

The penny press allowed (or encouraged) yellow journalism: sensationalism, exaggeration, sometimes outright fabrication (“clickbait” in today’s lingo).

\$50,000 REWARD.—WHO DESTROYED THE MAINE?—\$50,000 REWARD

EDITION FOR GREATER NEW YORK

NEW YORK JOURNAL

AND ADVERTISER.

The Journal will give \$50,000 for information leading to the detection of the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The reward will be paid in cash upon the conviction of the guilty party.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY

\$50,000!

\$50,000 REWARD!

For the Detection of the Perpetrator of the Maine Outrage!

The Journal offers \$50,000 reward for the conviction of the criminals who sent 258 American sailors to their death. Naval officers unanimous that the ship was destroyed on purpose.

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SPORTING
SPECIAL.

AN AMERICAN PAPER FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE.

NEW YORK JOURNAL

BASEBALL

NO. 5,639 P.M.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, MAY 16, 1894.

PRICE ONE CENT.

SPANISH SHIPS ON OUR COAST! DIED IN FOLDS OF OLD GLORY!

Mysterious. Warships
Seen by Incoming
Vessels May Be
Privateers.

FIRST DEAD OF THE WAR.

ENSIGN WORTH BAGLEY.
OILER J. VARVARESE.
FIREMAN J. DENESE.
COOK E. B. TUNNELL.
FIREMAN G. B. MEEK.

The Wounded.
Lieut. J. B. Bernadou.
William Patterson.
Daniel McKeown.

Bagley and His Men
to Be Revenged by
the Machias and
Wilmington.

20th century: development of journalism as a profession. Pushback against yellow journalism.



Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics—1st version in 1926.

<http://spjnetwork.org/quill2/codedcontroversey/ethics-code-1926.pdf>

Journalistic ethics were designed, in part, to make the news more objective.

The search for objectivity led to a heavy reliance on official sources—government officials, people with titles. Problem: Government officials could manipulate journalists (Brent Cunningham article).



Objectivity often got conflated with neutrality, which led to many instances of false equivalence (Brent Cunningham). Air “both sides” when there is really only one side.

Journalists have historically used false equivalence because it makes them seem fair and neutral. It also creates conflict, thus making a story newsworthy and helping attract audiences.

There is less false equivalence in the media today as journalists take stronger stands on what is true.

Television news emerged in the 1950s. Sought broad audiences, reached through relatively centrist news, delivered in a calm and earnest fashion. The public had high levels of trust in television news from 1950s through the 1970s.



Walter Cronkite, anchor of CBS Evening News, 1962-1981. Closed each newscast with "And that's the way it is."



Television news from the 1950s to 1970s was a loss leader. Networks felt obligated to provide news due to the fairness doctrine, which said television stations must broadcast in the public interest, and the content must be balanced.

60 Minutes (CBS). Debuted 1968, and in 1971 became first broadcast news show to make a profit. Pressure began mounting for other programs to make a profit.



1976 movie *Network*, about the pressures on television news to seek audiences, ratings, and profit.

1980s-present, rise of national and international media conglomerates.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_conglomerate

Media conglomerates are subject to executive and shareholder pressures; news is just another product. Achieve profits by holding down costs while delivering high ratings/sales/clicks, or get fired.



The largest freestanding Internet sites are also profit-seeking businesses.



Cost side: decline of investigative journalism (too expensive). Still exists in certain outlets.



Revenue side: Find stories that people want to read, listen, or watch (same incentives and pressures as penny press, but intensified). Search for drama, conflicts, discrete events, and stories that are easily personalized—with implications for truth seeking.

Revenue side, in the last few decades: Given that mass audiences are gone, find stories that resonate with the identity of your niche audience, which often involves stoking outrage about the “other side”. More differentiation between media outlets.

21st century: new challenges to the desirability or possibility of a journalist's objectivity.



Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics—2014 version. No reference to objectivity, but many references to truth-seeking procedures.

<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

From today's readings: Wesley Lowery and Margaret Sullivan reject striving for objectivity.

Their alternatives: truth seeking through accuracy, fairness, context, correcting own mistakes, careful use of sources, etc.

From today's readings: Louise Perry highlights an episode of bias, and Charles Cooke makes the same case for the mainstream media in general.

Smith: Giving up objectivity as an ideal could undermine the search for truth if journalists see themselves as crusaders, succumb to tribalism, lose any shred of intellectual humility, and use their stories to affirm the values they already hold.