

# Theory Workshop #6

## Information/News

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# This Workshop

These workshops are self-paced overviews and information references that provide critical knowledge to help you succeed in this course.

This workshop covers theories perspectives on information and news that provide background for your course research project.

This workshop is in part based on material from:

Burett, R. and Marshal, P.D. (2003). *Web Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge

# Information

*Information wants to be free...*

This popular adage actually refers to the “*free flow of information*” rather than free as in no cost.

In this workshop, we will look at news and information flows and the challenges of judging information quality online.

# Digital Information

The internet has changed news into another form of general information that complicates the role of journalism.

Digital news tends to have a relative short-life span, it is immediate, and has the capacity to link to other sources.

Users consume media **instrumentally** and **ritualistically**.

**Instrumental** media use is intentional and reflects a selective use of specific media content.

**Ritual** media use is more related to the medium, rather than content, and is associated with habit, pastime, and companionship.



That is, you may have the **ritual** of listening to NPR in the morning but will **instrumentally** look for more information on a specific story in the newspaper or online.

# News

Despite all the design options available, new media often mimics the format of old media.

Online news is often displayed like a newspaper; categories such headlines, sports, business, and classifieds are useful because these are organizational forms and categories users are familiar with.

This is much the same legacy effect of having a computer “desktop” with “files” and “documents” laid out to mimic a physical desk. This was originally used to sell the computer to business users.



# News

*“What democracy requires is public debate, not information” (Lasch, 1995).*

Traditionally, news was seen an essential element of democracy for its role of informing citizens.

However, news outlets are also large media corporations whose main goal is to maximize profits.



# Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is how information is controlled via choke points in flow.

Traditionally, editors at newspapers and news directors at TV/Radio stations were gatekeepers who decide what is or is not “news” and which news is more important.

However, individuals are also gatekeepers as we choose which news we consume.

The internet, with its availability, limitless capacity (unlike a 30 minute news cast or newspaper page) and interactivity, greatly complicates the gatekeeping process.

# The Transformation of News



The internet is another step in the total transformation of news that began with the debut of CNN and 24/7 news in 1980 which created the broadening of the definition of news to fit a 24 hour news hole. Moreover, during this time as media consolidated, networks started to see news as a profit point. Previously, news units lost money but were maintained because they generated status and prestige.

Once news became just another type of content it began its shift to using aspects of entertainment programs to attract audiences.



# New\$



Recall, that media forms or organizations are not natural and have always been the result of the complex interplay of politics, culture, and economics.

For example, newspapers often discussed financial difficulties are not a factor of their inability to make a profit (*produce more income that their production and distribution consume*) but because many newspaper were purchased with debt when profits were high (dotcom boom) and now there is not enough profit to make the payments.

So, it is not that people do not pay for and consume newspaper content (although this is an issue), it is mainly a factor of poor business practices.

# Legitimacy

Originally, the ability to purchase the means of production (radio/TV station, newspapers, etc.) and their relative scarcity conveyed legitimacy.

However, now that almost anyone can create a website that looks as good and runs as well as any news organization or other authority, combined with general degradation of news quality makes differentiating low quality and high quality news and information a challenge.

## Advantages/Disadvantages of Information Sources

All information sources such as the media, government, or academe are products of complex social, economic, political, and cultural forces. These forces impact how those who work in or manage these systems view what is credible or even worthwhile.

This is further complicated by the fact that these effects work, often in different ways, at the individual, professional, organizational, institutional, and system levels.

## Case Study: US Press

The idea of objectivity in the press is a direct result of technological, social, and economic changes.

The invention of the telegraph fostered the creation of news services that could deliver stories nationally, which resulted in the need for more generic or neutral accounts of news that could play anywhere. Previously, news had been a very local affair which regional flavor, viewpoints, and bias.

Newspapers used to be operated by political groups, but when they made the shift to advertiser support they needed to reach a broader audience, which meant dulling their partisan edge. They became businesses and their main focus shifted to making money, not pushing an explicit political agenda.

News media depends on access to people in power and rough treatment by journalists often results in denial of access. Moreover, the news media is a multi-billion dollar business so it is effectively part of the establishment and is invested in the status quo.

Journalists in the US are mostly educated in large public universities, taught by former journalists who received advanced degrees from a handful of journalism Ph.D. programs. Journalists are largely white and male and unlike 70%+ of the general population hold college degrees. Moreover, this profession has been shrinking with fewer jobs. This training and these factors result in a particular worldview, a narrow concept of what constitutes "newsworthiness," and a tendency to be hesitant in challenging authority.

All these factors influence what we see/read in the press (and what we do not).

# Advantages/Disadvantages of Information Sources

Navigating information sources is a matter of taking into account the regimes of control in place in each system to ensure quality.

Often credibility is higher for systems with systematic internal/external controls. These include:

*Professional/member codes that dictate behavior and reinforce norms of behavior.*

*Certification/licensing that ensures standards and has penalties for violations.*

*Independent oversight by groups or organizations without vested interest.*

*Legal/regulatory restrictions that set standards and have policing powers*

*Transparency (process) that demonstrates how information is gathered and evaluated.*

## **Red Flags**

Any of these MAY indicate poor information quality.

*Significant omissions (esp. contradictory info)*

*Factual errors (major or minor)*

*Misrepresentation of others material/ research*

*Failure to identify sources, affiliations, funding, self.*

*Value laden language/extreme hyperbole*

*Decontextualized (no dates/lack of info)*

*Faulty Logic (guilt by association, unsupported causality, drawing-the-line fallacy...)*

## Advantages/Disadvantages of some Sources

*Academic*: well vetted, but often dated and constrained by discipline and tradition.

*Mass Media*: immediate/analysis, but constrained by space/time (page space, 30 minute newscast), advertising, “newsworthiness.”

*Government*: good data source, but analysis is constrained by politics (what gets studied and how)

*Industry Press*: inside, specialized, and timely information, but constrained by narrow focus and interests.

“*Alternative*” *Press*: unconstrained by convention, constrained by often narrow oppositional focus.

*Blogs*: insider expertise, but may have hidden bias - quality must be taken within context of its sphere (judged by peers).

*Crowd Source*: (Wikipedia) at best a good consensus of the facts and issues - at worse simplistic analysis of complex problems, may lack required expertise.

*Hierarchy of Media*: Higher quality information can often be found in publications geared toward political and business elites - decision-makers who need the best analysis. Some of these publication are [The Economist](#), [Foreign Policy](#), or the Business section of your local paper (where they hide the real news).

# Task

To earn credit you need to post a substantive 100+ word comment on this workshop's wiki page and complete the following tasks and bring them to class.

For the in class workshop think about how these concepts and ideas reflect, contradict, or interact with the week's readings and your own experiences with information and news.

1. Select examples 3 sources of news and information that you feel are credible and trustworthy.
2. For each selection provide 3 reasons why you see each source is a credible and trustworthy source of news and /or information.
3. Using the "systems with systematic internal/external controls" list on the Advantages/Disadvantages of Information Sources slide, evaluate each source.
4. Teams will discuss and compare their tasks and prepare a 10 minute presentation on the topic of the workshop. This is not just a reading of each students task submission but a coherent discussion where the elements interact and support each other. One team will be chosen at random to present.
5. Turn in tasks sheets for credit.