

THINKING
BIG

An Educator's Guide to The 19th Annual
Chicago Humanities Festival
OCTOBER 3 - NOVEMBER 16, 2008

chf

www.chfestival.org

Robert Irwin *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue* ©2006. Linear polyurethane paint on 6 aircraft honeycomb aluminum rectangles, overall installed: 10'-1/2" x 54' x 22'; aluminum rectangles: 16' x 22' each. Photo by: Genevieve Hanson / Courtesy PaceWildenstein

2008 Baskes Lecturer on History: Robert Darnton

Robert Darnton, Historian



Robert Darnton is an American cultural historian, internationally recognized scholar on eighteenth century France, and a pioneer in the field known as the history of book. Additionally, he is currently an entrepreneur

exploring electronic books, Web publishing, and other forms of new media. He is founder of the Gutenberge program sponsored by the Mellon Foundation.

Darnton is a graduate of Harvard and Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He briefly worked as a reporter at *The New York Times* (1964-1965), then joined the Princeton faculty in 1968, where he was the Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of European History and director of the Center for the Study of Books and Media. In 2007 he transferred to emeritus status at Princeton, and was appointed Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and director of the Harvard University Library. He has been a visiting professor or fellow at many

universities and institutes for advanced study and has served as a trustee of the New York Public Library and the Oxford University Press (USA).

Darnton was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship (1982-1987), and has served as President of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (1987-1991) and of the American Historical Association (1999). He has been elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and has also been named Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, the highest award given by the French government. Darnton has been the recipient of the Leo Gershey Prize of the American Historical Association (for *The Business of Enlightenment*), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (for *The Great Cat Massacre*), the National Book Critics Circle Award (for *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*), and Princeton University's Behrman Humanities Award (1987).

wikipedia.org. Wikipedia Foundation, Inc. 24 April. 2008. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Darnton

news.harvard.edu/gazette. Harvard University. 24 April 2008. http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2007/05_24/99-library.html

Getting to the Core: Excerpt

An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Standing here on the threshold of the year 2000, it appears that the road to the new millennium leads through Silicon Valley. We have entered the information age, and the future, it seems, will be determined by the media. In fact, some would claim that the modes of communication have replaced the modes of production as the driving force of the modern world. I would like to dispute that view. Whatever its value as prophecy, it will not work as history, because it conveys a specious sense of a break with the past. I would argue that every age was an age of information, each in its own way, and that communication systems have always shaped events.

That argument may sound suspiciously like common sense; but, if pushed hard enough, it could open up a fresh perspective on the past. As a starting point, I would ask a question about the media today: What is news? Most of us would reply that news is what we read in newspapers or see and hear on news broadcasts. If we considered the matter further, however, we probably would agree that news is not what happened—yesterday, or last week—but rather stories about what happened. It is a kind of narrative, transmitted by special kinds of media. That line of reasoning soon leads to entanglement in literary theory and the World Wide Web. But if projected backward, it may help to disentangle some knotty problems in the past.

I would propose a general attack on the problem of how societies made sense of events and transmitted information about them, something that might be called the history of communication. In principle, this kind of history could provoke a reassessment of any period in the past, for every society develops its own ways of hunting and gathering information; its means of communicating what it gathers, whether or not it uses concepts such as “news” and “the media,” can reveal a great deal about its understanding of its own experience. Examples can be cited from studies of coffeehouses in Stuart England, tea houses in early republican China, marketplaces in contemporary Morocco, street poetry in seventeenth-century Rome, slave rebellions in nineteenth-century Brazil, runner networks in the Mogul Raj of India, even the bread and circuses of the Roman Empire.

But instead of attempting to pile up examples by roaming everywhere through the historical record, I would like to examine a communication system at work in a particular time and place, the Old Regime in France. More precisely, I would ask: How did you find out what the news was in Paris around 1750? Not, I submit, by reading a newspaper, because papers with news in them—news as we understand it today, about public affairs and prominent persons—did not exist. The government did not permit them.

To find out what was really going on, you went to the tree of Cracow. It was a large, leafy chestnut tree, which stood at the heart of Paris in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. It probably had acquired its name from heated discussions that took place around it during the War of the Polish Succession (1733–1735), although the name also suggested rumor-mongering (*craquer*: to tell dubious stories). Like a mighty magnet, the tree attracted *nouvellistes de bouche*, or newsmongers, who spread information about current events by word of mouth. They claimed to know, from private sources (a letter, an indiscreet servant, a remark overheard in an antechamber of Versailles), what was really happening in the corridors of power—and the people in power took them seriously, because the government worried about what Parisians were saying. Foreign diplomats allegedly sent agents to pick up news or to plant it at the foot of the tree of Cracow. There were several other nerve centers for transmitting “public noises” (*bruits publics*), as this variety of news was known: special benches in the Tuileries and Luxembourg Gardens, informal speakers’ corners on the Quai des Augustins and the Pont Neuf, cafés known for their loose talk, and boulevards where news bulletins were bawled out by peddlers of canards (facetious broadsides) or sung by hurdy-gurdy players. To tune in on the news, you could simply stand in the street and cock your ear.

“Jadis c’était Versailles”

Jadis c’était Versailles
 Qui donnait le bon goût,
 Aujourd’hui la canaille
 Règne, tient le haut bout;
 Si la cour se ravalles,
 Pourquoi s’étonne-t-on,
 N’est-ce pas de la Halle
 Que nous vient le poisson?

“It used to be Versailles”

It used to be Versailles
 That set the standard of good taste;
 But today the rabble
 Is reigning, has the upper hand.
 If the court degrades itself,
 Why should we be surprised:
 Isn’t it from the central food market
 That we get our fish?

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. fr. 13709, fol. 71

Darnton, Robert, Presidential Address: An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris. *The American Historical Review* 105.1 (2000): 78 pars. 1 May 2008 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/105.1/ah000001.html>>.

REFLECTION: Poem

To Television

By Robert Pinsky

Not a “window on the world”
 But as we call you,
 A box a tube
 Terrarium of dreams and wonders.
 Coffin of shades, ordained
 Cotillion of phosphors
 Or liquid crystal
 Homey miracle, tub
 Of acquiescence, vein of defiance.
 Your patron in the pantheon would be
 Hermes
 Raster dance,
 Quick one, little thief, escort
 Of the dying and comfort of the sick,
 In a blue glow my father and little sister
 sat
 Snuggled in one chair watching you
 Their wife and mother was sick in the
 head
 I scorned you and them as I scorned so
 much
 Now I like you best in a hotel room,
 Maybe minutes
 Before I have to face an audience: behind
 The doors of the armoire, box
 Within a box--Tom & Jerry, or also brilliant
 And reassuring, Oprah Winfrey.
 Thank you, for I watched, I watched
 Sid Caesar speaking French and Japanese
 not
 Through knowledge but imagination,
 His quickness, and Thank You, I watched
 live
 Jackie Robinson stealing
 Home, the image--O strung shell--
 enduring
 Fleeter than light like these words we
 Remember in, they too winged
 At the helmet and ankles.

http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/pinsky/to_television.php

As **Robert Darnton** notes in “An Early Information Society” “communications systems have always shaped events.” In this address, Darnton lists what he calls “stories about what happened”—from “coffeehouses in Stuart England” to “marketplaces in contemporary Morocco.”

Or perhaps, a modern high school. What is the modern high school’s equivalent to 18th century Paris’ “leafy chestnut tree”?

Lesson Plan: The Student Cafeteria as “Leafy Chestnut Tree”

Essential Questions: How does information make its way around the modern high school, and what is the difference between real stories and the versions passed from student to student?

Goals

This lesson is most suitable for English/Language Arts and Social Science classes. It addresses research, observation, and analysis, as well as presentation skills.

Objectives

Students will conduct independent observation and interview-style fieldwork. Students will also conduct source-based research into local, school-related news, and they will compare and contrast two sources of information as a way of exploring the concept of news as “story.”

Materials

- “Field notebook”
- Local newspaper articles

Timeframe

Approximately one week, with time devoted to fieldwork outside of class and at least two periods of in-class discussion and presentation.

Optional Alternative:

Deeper analysis of the ways different news sources view the same story. For example, *Fox News* vs. *NBC News* or *NPR*, or *The New York Times* vs. *USA Today*.

Process and Procedure

1. Hold a large group discussion based on Robert Darnton’s “Presidential Address” focusing on the notion of news as “story” and the idea that different sources will produce different versions of the same story. Students will list examples of this concept from their own field experience.
2. Student researchers will “go into the field.” They will spend one of their lunch periods listening to conversations around them, making notes in their field notebooks. It is important that each student find out the main source of their peers’ information. The next day in class, students will share their findings, making a list of both topics and sources. (*Note: The teacher should guide students toward general categories rather than specific “dirt,” i.e., who is going to the prom with whom. Likewise, the source of information, or who said what, is less important than the category of the source, be it “peer” or “teacher.”*)
- * **Alternatively**, students can compare a story as told by two separate news sources: *The New York Times* and *USA Today* (or even a tabloid such as *The Star* or a tabloid-style TV show such as *Entertainment Tonight*). How are the two versions of the story similar? How are they different? And what might account for these differences?
3. Students will then research already written news sources about their school (recommended) or about the topics they have discovered their peers are discussing. Then, they should make a list of facts presented by the article and the source(s) of each fact.
4. Students will then return to the cafeteria, this time to interview their peers. Specifically, they should ask their peers about the events discussed in the article, asking them first what they know about it and second where they got their information.
5. Students will compare the basic facts of the newspaper article to the student accounts, creating a document that clearly shows similarities and differences.
6. Finally, students will write their own version of the story, based on accounts they have culled from their cafeteria discussions, perhaps to be published in a class newspaper called *The Cafeteria Times*.

Assessment

Field notes; information type and source categorization list; document comparing the “official” story to the story circulating among students; final copy of *The Cafeteria Times* news story.

Acknowledgements

The Chicago Humanities Festival receives principal support for its education programs from Nuveen Investments, Inc. and the Polk Bros. Foundation. Additional support for education programs is provided by: Julie and Roger Baskes, The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, The Lloyd A. Fry

Foundation, The Field Foundation of Illinois, Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, Terra Foundation for American Art, Lohengrin Foundation, Inc. The Children's Humanities Festival is presented by Target in conjunction with the Chicago Humanities Festival.


NUVEEN
Investments



Northern Trust