

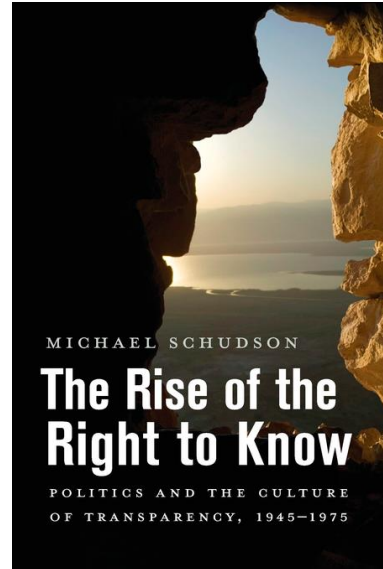
Michael Schudson, **The Rise of the Right to Know: Politics and the Culture of Transparency, 1945–1975**, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015, 348 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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A swarm of research has been buzzing around subjects such as WikiLeaks (and other platforms of digital disclosure), open government initiatives, and antisecrecy advocacy. While communication scholars explicate their theoretical implications and assess their practical effects, the causal factors that helped spur their development (and social acceptance) have received little attention. Our field urgently needed a text that, rather than taking for granted the artifacts of today's culture of transparency, puts this culture in a historical and sociological context. The latest book by Michael Schudson valuably fills this need by examining a set of social, political, and cultural shifts from the Cold War era, which propelled a new model of democracy in which people could, as never before, expect "freedom of information" and transparency from their government.



This type of democracy has been characterized alternately as "advocacy democracy," "audience democracy," "post-representative democracy," "trans-legislative democracy," "counter-democracy," and "monitory democracy." Schudson introduces each of these before ultimately endorsing political scientist John Keane's idea of monitory democracy. He observes how "modern democracies . . . especially after 1945, have added new mechanisms of representation that allow continuous, rather than episodic, representation; popularly generated rather than party-controlled representation; and many platforms for entrepreneurial democratic action" (p. 241). By his lights, these developments contribute to a democratic practice in which various actors and institutions keep an eye on one another, engendering a political system that is "more representative than ever" (p. 241). We tend to think of the advent of political polling, fact-checking, and watchdog organizations as key players in this new monitorial culture. But we could also think of the way in which politicians send "trackers" with handheld video cameras to their opponents' campaign rallies in hopes of recording a gaffe or the way in which news organizations have begun to publicly criticize each other for reporting errors and perceived bias. How did we end up with this type of democracy? The bulk of Schudson's book, after all, is concerned with cultural history and media sociology, not political theory.

Schudson sources and synthesizes seemingly eclectic phenomena from various parts of political and popular culture to craft a comprehensive and compelling analysis. Included in this analysis, to different degrees, are the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966; the emergence of television

talk shows like *Donahue*, which “incorporated openness as a practice and as a value” (p. 12); the Inspectors General Act of 1978, which dramatically expanded government accountability; the increasing prevalence and influence of whistleblowers during the Watergate era; the success of consumer-friendly product labeling reforms; and the unprecedented frankness with which First Lady Betty Ford spoke about her breast cancer and alcoholism.

Schudson sets out “to sketch the emergence of a culture of disclosure . . . and institutionalization of civic knowing” (p. 24) and to explain them. He begins his analysis by staking out a general claim and overarching observation:

In domains public, private, and professional, expanded disclosure practices have become more fully institutionalized in the past half century and the virtue and value of openness more widely accepted, enough so to suggest that both the experience of being human and the experience of constructing a democracy have changed in response to a new transparency imperative and a new embrace of a right to know. (pp. 15–16)

The reader is then taken on a tour with several fascinating stops. It begins with chapter 2’s examination of the origins of the Freedom of Information Act and is followed by: the advancement of informational rights for consumers (chapter 3), legislative reforms which made the workings of Congress more visible to its constituents (chapter 4), the advent of more independent, intrepid, and contextual journalism (chapter 5), the almost accidental and yet highly influential introduction of environmental impact statements (chapter 6), and, finally, the broader changes within democratic political norms that accommodated and encouraged this new culture of transparency (chapter 7).

Schudson’s work is distinguished by a knack for situating sociological analysis within historical research. This makes for engrossing narratives. He acknowledges that sociologists (such as he) are more comfortable investigating social structures and processes, and have much to learn from historians who “may remind us that events, unpredicted but impossible to ignore, and forceful individual personalities, not just generational cohorts or offices and roles, matter” (p. 263). Where much of the current research being done in media sociology can be ahistorical, Schudson deftly sifts through archival papers (and memoirs and recollective interviews) to understand the motivations of individual actors, the preliminary ideas (and the originators of those ideas) that underpinned reform movements, and the key decisions of underappreciated bureaucracies that would have outsized and ongoing influence.

In emphasizing the importance of pivotal events, Schudson’s work departs from not only an *ahistorical* habit within sociology wherein social and cultural dynamics are seen as stable and explicable products of institutional arrangements. It also departs from the discipline’s *historicist* habit within which, according to Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, scholarship attempts “to understand the laws of historical development . . . [and to] be able to predict future developments,” the consequence often being a type of collectivism that “emphasize[s] the significance of some group or collective—for example, a class—without which the individual is nothing at all” (Popper 2013, pp. 7–8). To be sure, Schudson appreciates and duly investigates the role of institutions and includes, within a “general explanation” for a culture of transparency, “the institutional framework within which the developing norms

and practices come to make sense" (p. 24). But also included are "the happenstance of everyday politics, everyday events, and the consequences of having one party rather than the other in power" and a "spirit that made right-to-know or disclosure reforms resonant with a changing culture" (p. 26).<sup>1</sup> With a broad analytical perspective, Schudson convincingly demonstrates how individuals and events uniquely contributed to this spirit—or "what British scholar Raymond Williams called a 'structure of feeling'" (p. 18)—as institutions acted to catalyze and codify it.

Schudson's book also departs from the historian's habit of focusing on the ostensibly "historic" personalities—the presidents and media moguls who most conspicuously championed open government and consumer-friendly reforms—to shine a light on the work of senior bureaucrats and obscure lawmakers, the unsung agents of social change.

John Moss was a California Congressman and a "longtime Democratic activist with an indomitable work ethic" (p. 37) who tapped into the patriotism of the Cold War (and the antisecrecy attitudes of the press) to promote the "freedom of information" legislation that ultimately became the Freedom of Information Act. Esther Peterson was the Kennedy and Johnson administration official who pushed for truth-in-packaging and truth-in-lending bills before heading to work for Giant supermarkets to initiate consumer reforms such as "open dating" (e.g., expiration dates) and nutritional labeling practices, which pressured competitors to mimic—and compelled lawmakers to mandate—the practices. Peterson "probably did much more for consumers by working as a public advocate for a sympathetic commercial organization than she ever did in the White House" (p. 90). Richard Conlon was a former journalist who, for decades, headed the Democratic Study Group, a Congressional caucus that used research to push progressive policies, and successfully enlisted the press to persuade lawmakers to record teller votes, thereby making the legislative process more transparent. This has been called "perhaps the first instance where public pressure has been effectively utilized in an effort to implement institutional change in Congress" (p. 130) and earned the unelected Conlon his reputation as "the 436th Member of the House." Schudson acknowledges the ways in which public opinion and presidential leadership contribute to a culture of transparency, but insists "social change in this case was powerfully shaped not just by the foot soldiers and the generals but by the second lieutenants I have focused on here" (p. 270).

Schudson is omnivorous not only in terms of the objects of his analysis and his research methods, but also when it comes to the scholarship that informs his work. The book dexterously draws from philosophy, political science, history, communication, sociology, and works of popular journalism and memoir—this, at a moment when interdisciplinarity seems to be publicly touted by the academy but privately resisted by most of its academicians. Perhaps as impressive as this disciplinary diversity is Schudson's application (and amplification) of the work of his Columbia University graduate students alongside that of well-established scholars. The book cites an unpublished transcript of an interview with *New York Times* editor Max Frankel conducted by Lucas Graves (now an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison) as well as research on the rise in "contextual reporting" in the second

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<sup>1</sup> Schudson promptly acknowledges that a "'spirit' is a very spongy kind of causal force. But its elusiveness is no excuse for ignoring it" (p. 26).

half of the 20th century, which Schudson coauthored with Katherine Fink (now an assistant professor at Pace University).

Readers who come to this book in a university setting might be satisfied to learn much of the current culture of transparency is attributed to “a mass public with access to a critical culture in higher education” (p. 26) and that

the expansion and shifting character of college education . . . helps explain not only the changing culture of the newsroom [as journalists and their audiences increasingly obtained college degrees] but also the growing public acceptance of . . . efforts to keep a more watchful eye on government and sometimes also on corporate enterprise that touches consumers directly. (p. 170)

Whereas once students were expected to have reverence for, and deference to, canonic texts, they are increasingly encouraged to read “against the text.” This represents a rise of a critical and even an adversarial academic culture, which contributed to the increasingly critical public mind and the increasingly adversarial journalism culture that informed that critical public mind.

In his final chapter, Schudson recalls how he began his research expecting the rise of the transparency movement to coincide principally with the 1960s, given that decade’s reputation for iconoclasm and defiance of traditional institutions. Yet his research reveals the open government and consumer reform movements were “under way before American ground troops went to Vietnam, before an antiwar movement existed, before Students for a Democratic Society was founded, before a modern women’s movement took off” (p. 268). A critical reading of this text suggests cultural transformations are not, in fact, as patterned and predictable as some scholars would like to believe. Nor is their continuity something upon which we can blindly rely. “The rise of cultural support and institutional mechanisms for a right to know need not be a permanent transformation” (p. 270), Schudson warns. Just as those who forget dark parts of our history are doomed to repeat them, those who fail to appreciate brighter parts of our history are liable to fail to sustain them. “Sometimes the human spirit shifts. When it does, and when it does in a way that enhances human capacities, we should recognize it and accord it the honor it deserves” (p. 270). By giving us such an illuminative book that simultaneously examines a culture of information and openness as well as represents an exemplar of that culture, Schudson honors that spirit indeed.

### References

- Popper, K. (2013). *The open society and its enemies: Vol. 1, The spell of Plato* [New introduction by Alan Ryan and an essay by E. H. Gombrich]. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1945)