

Michael Schudson, **Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press**, Polity Press: Malden, MA, 2008, 184 pp. \$69.95 (hardcover), \$22.45 (paperback).

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This is a time when nearly all American newspapers are faced with unprecedented challenges. The economic challenges are dire: Declining circulation revenue for over 18 years; lay-offs of more than 15,000 newspaper employees in 2008; bankruptcies of major newspapers and the closure of others signal that even online models for revenue simply aren't solvent (State of the News Media, 2009; Paper Cuts, 2009). And increasingly, newspapers have come under attack from those who argue that the time for newspapers is over — that it is time for a “we media,” as Dan Gillmor (2006) puts it, or the wisdom of the crowds of vibrant citizen journalists to take the helm, as Clay Shirky (2008) has suggested.



But Michael Schudson, sometimes to his own surprise, has come to the defense of the great institution of the American newspaper writ large — and its necessity to democracy — in a collection of essays. In this collection, he takes issue with the writings of John Dewey, James Carey, and W. Lance Bennett, among others, to defend the practices of the press and challenge some long-held critiques about the role of a press in a democracy. Though only the introduction and two essays are in their first printing, the collection makes various journal articles and book chapters easily accessible. Further, in bringing them together in this form, Schudson is able to mount a coherent argument for the relevance of the press.

In his introduction, Schudson clearly states his goal: “. . . to understand journalism’s special place in democracies, especially how to think through its mission once we stop equating democracy with maximum feasible participation or direct popular rule” (p. 3). He does not remain nostalgic for the “ghost of journalism past,” (p. 5), but rather, he acknowledges the vitality and possibility of journalism in the new forms’ ability to collect and disseminate news that is vital to a representative democracy.

Schudson offers a major new essay in his second chapter titled “Six or Seven Things News can do for Democracy.” He begins by arguing with James Carey (1997), who contended that journalism is, in fact, democracy. Schudson maintains that journalism is in the service of democracy — after all, journalism has existed when democracy hasn’t — but that journalism, by itself, does not produce democracy.

The seven “things” include some predictable and some more nuanced observations. Schudson argues that the news plays a vital role in informing the public, which is perhaps the most common claim about the importance of news in a democracy. The second function he identifies is the function of investigation in the role of keeping government officials accountable. The third key role is analysis, where journalists help break down major events into something understandable — a role that is increasingly diminished, but one that still calls out to a public that might not know about the subject, but could

otherwise gain from that knowledge. Schudson calls the fourth key role “social empathy,” and he acknowledges that it has generally not appeared in lists like the one he has compiled. Social empathy is the human interest story — but beyond that — it is the method of using individuals to create collective yearnings among decision-makers (principally, possible voters) for change. The next role, journalism as a public forum, is quite obvious, and Schudson promotes the Web as increasingly important in fulfilling this role. Journalism’s role in mobilization is explained in a more murky fashion, with Schudson descending into the history of the partisan press, but one can assume that he means that journalism inspires people to mobilize. He also suggests that a journalist-as-advocate model might well work in a pluralist news environment.

Schudson’s final function of what news should do for democracy is to publicize representative democracy. Schudson is firmly committed to the idea of protecting minority rights as opposed to ardent populism, and he challenges journalism to advance liberal democracy. His proposal is not one that journalists should become “evangelists” for this perspective, but that they should cover, politically, institutions that have been taken for granted (though he does not specify which). Further, he suggests an examination of “horizontal accountability,” an effort whereby the press explores not just elections, but how different government institutions keep each other in check.

In this novel essay, Schudson articulates both old and new goals for the press, departing from conventional wisdom and creating significant challenges. These functions are what the news, ideally functioning, can do for democracy, but Schudson leaves unanswered what happens when the news remains information-poor, sensationalistic, or increasingly, too resource-poor, to provide the kind of coverage that news can provide to enable democracy.

Schudson’s other new contribution emerges from a lecture he gave at the San Diego Museum of Art on the occasion of a major traveling exhibition of Norman Rockwell paintings. His subject in Chapter 4 is “The Invention of the American newspaper as popular art, 1890-1930.” The time span he covers represents the sea-change from party press to the rise of objectivity and the penny press — explaining how each iteration of the press contributed to discourse in democracy. In what he acknowledges as his most elegiac and nostalgic essay, he writes that the newspaper is “planned and designed and organized printed talk. As such, it is an art object” (p. 49). He opines that newspapers used to saturate the public consciousness, and that columnists as well as publishers like Hearst wielded tremendous power. But, Schudson critiques his own elegy, noting that 19th century journalism failed to tackle the complexity of American social life, just as Rockwell didn’t grapple with the messiness of 20<sup>th</sup> century American family life.

The essay the book is named for, “Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press” (Chapter 5) takes on a remarkably different tone than two of Carey’s major essays, “The Dark Continent of American Journalism” (1986) and “The Press, Public Opinion and Public Discourse” (1995). Carey had expressly attacked the news media for being event-centered, establishment-oriented, depending on official sources, caught up in ideals of objectivity and other professional ideologies, and obsessed with conflict. Carey also saw the press as having become so adversarial toward politicians that it had lost the interest of the

people. Not so, says Schudson. In fact, what Carey decried is ultimately what Schudson says is necessary for a democracy to function.

In this essay, Schudson also comes to the defense of the press from other critics, such as Bennett (2001), and argues that the press's dependence on official sources for the news and its position within the establishment is actually not that terrible. Schudson doesn't have the stats and research to back up his claims, but he argues that journalism in the U.S. is still pretty decent; it "is still a practice that offends powerful groups, speaks truth to power, and provides access to a diversity of opinion" (p. 54).

There are ways that journalists break free from the establishment critiques, and many of them are the problems that Carey saw with the press. One such mode is the event-driven orientation of the news or, as Schudson puts it, "shit happens" and power structures are unmasked (p. 55). Conflict, skepticism about politicians, and the goal of finding something novel (insider/outside) all help to push news in the service of democracy.

This idea that "shit happens" is one that is reflected in another essay in the book, "The Anarchy of Events and the Anxiety of Storytelling" (Chapter 8). Schudson has wrestled before (1997) with the tension between academics who say that the work of journalists is to socially construct reality through a variety of filters, news practices and conventions and journalists, who assert that they are merely participating in the recording of events. Here, he firmly comes down on the side of journalists, arguing that events as reported are not that far off from the events themselves, that they are reported, but not "fundamentally changed" (p. 92), and that part of the reason for this is the "anarchy of events."

Schudson similarly invokes Carey in two other essays, most directly in his attack on Dewey and Carey in "Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy" (Chapter 9). Schudson has been on the attack against Dewey in favor of Lippmann recently (see this journal [Schudson, 2008]). Schudson argues that conversation is important in democracy, but that conversation requires the "prior existence of a public world — often available in print" (p. 103). Further, the face-to-face talk so romanticized by Carey and Dewey leads to written action — either in news or in the form of democratic action, such as a petition. It is democracy first, argues Schudson, that creates conversation, rather than conversation that creates democracy.

In the final chapter of the book titled, "The trouble with Experts and Why Democracies Need Them" (Chapter 10), Schudson again responds to Carey (1969), albeit indirectly, through the Dewey/Lippman debate about the subject. Both Dewey and Carey derided experts for distancing themselves from the people; Carey was wary of the public relations professionals serving as pseudo-experts in the press. But Schudson sees a vital role for experts in democracy, even viewing politicians as experts. So long as they can be reined in by both the governments and a questioning press that pits experts against each other, experts can 1) "speak truth to power," 2) "clarify the grounds of public debate" and, 3) "diagnose opportunity and injustice" (pp. 118-119). Far from distancing ourselves from the "expert," we can see the expert, instead, fulfilling a vital role in our democracy.

Other essays are oriented around Schudson's interest in the link between politics (particularly representative politics) and American journalism. "The U.S. Model of Journalism: Exception or Exemplar?" (Chapter 3) argues persuasively that U.S. sociohistorical conditions have produced a press that could not be reproduced elsewhere, though its underlying spirit of "speaking up" and equal treatment for all that can be respected elsewhere. In Chapter 6, "The Concept of Politics in Contemporary U.S. Journalism," Schudson tries to build upon Gans' (1979) delineation of the "progressive" values that shape U.S. journalism and extends this to include other professional assumptions about how journalists interpret and shape political news. "What's Unusual about Covering Politics as Usual" (Chapter 7), is Schudson's post-9/11 meditation on the function of a press in a time of national tragedy, as well as on the pleasures and pitfalls of public journalism and nationalism.

Though the text is woven together from different essays compiled over the past 10 years, the collection nonetheless remains contemporary with the issues facing journalism today. There are, however, redundancies that inevitably emerge when one has been writing about certain subjects as long as Schudson has — for instance, there are multiple explications of the function of the partisan press and the rise of objectivity, as well as multiple arguments that conjure the *Good Citizen* (Schudson, 2002). But these are convincing arguments, and each is written with diligent care, so they do not tax the reader as repetitive. What is missing, however, is a statement, perhaps, about how Schudson might directly take on the claims of some of the contemporary utopians who see traditional journalism being replaced by wisdom from the crowds. Regardless, Schudson has made a convincing case for why journalism ought to remain the way it is, warts and all.

This text amounts to a strong defense of news journalism — not print journalism — but of the values of the press, albeit in ways unexpected from an academic. Schudson poses positions that have long been associated with critiques as actual benefits to the press and leaves us with the conclusion that far from being broken, our press is rather strong. One can see this book as an argument for the continued vitality of press values and present journalistic culture — in whatever form — and as Schudson trying to unite both journalists and academics with his work.

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