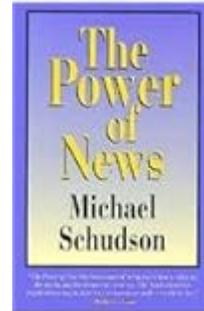




Michael Schudson. *The Power of News.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. 269 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-69587-0; \$54.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-69586-3.



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Bringing the Press Back In: Essays on the Power of News in American Political Life

In *The Power of News*, Michael Schudson offers a compelling argument for bringing the press back in to the political history of the United States. Historians, he claims, have largely ignored the vital and largely salutary role of the press in the career of American democracy. Ironically, moreover, in the few historical dramas in which the press has starred, historians and the general public have exaggerated its powers of persuasion, especially the power of modern television in shaping hearts and minds. Taken together, the ten essays explore first the historical development of the news, then myths about its influence, and finally its relationship to two basic aspects of a democratic society: the public sphere and the informational citizen.

In his original introduction, Schudson elegantly weaves together these various subtle, almost competing, themes. Here too he makes a useful conceptual contribution for those of us eager to write intelligently about the role of the press in American history. The news, like many other complex phenomena, can best be seen as a “culture,” a multifaceted and versatile “language in which action is constituted rather than the cause that generates

action” (p. 18). It is a store of “public knowledge” without which American democracy would be unimaginable but whose effect on specific political decisions or events is nearly impossible to measure—and usually slight.

He therefore rejects critics on the left (such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman) who, according to Schudson, reduce the news to a cloak for capitalism and a servile state. He also dismisses conservative critics who wave about evidence of the personal liberalism of reporters. Nor, finally, is the news solely a result of the media’s professional tendency to be negative, detached, technical, and official. The content of our daily paper and television news shows emerges, in Schudson’s arresting image, out of a “strategic ballet” between sources and journalists on a stage of representative government and market-driven media institutions (p. 3).[1]

Schudson’s first four chapters offer a historical view of the news. Since colonial times, he reminds us, newspapers have played central roles in first documenting, then rallying, and, more recently, interpreting American democracy—roles that most political historians have ignored according to Schudson. He supports this histo-

riographic claim in the text largely with rather meager evidence—the absence of various press figures and events from the index of a single history textbook. He would probably admit that historians of the Progressive Era, to refer to but one literature, had considerable and sophisticated discussions about the role of the press and journalists such as Walter Lippmann. Moreover, one of his basic theses—that the power of the press has been almost universally exaggerated—seems to vindicate that text book’s spare handling of the press.

Problems of evidence notwithstanding, his point is a deeper and more important one. Historians that have mentioned the press, he notes, have done so using what he terms a transmission model of information moving from sender to receiver that ultimately obscures the full role of the press. For as it transmits information, the press also constitutes a community. Performing this ritual function each morning, for example, residents of a city and its surrounding suburbs wake to the morning paper and stories about “their” mayor. These functions are difficult if not impossible to capture in the dominant “cause and effect” narrative of the historical profession and thus drop out of most historical accounts. Largely unheralded, the press prepared the minds of the colonists in Ben Franklin’s day, brought the city out to eager readers in the isolated countryside in the nineteenth century, and reinforced regional and national perspectives as well as new forms of commercial ventures such as department stores in our own century. This book eloquently points out that the press’s role in forming party, ethnic, group, and even ideological identities demands more attention.[2]

Other chapters demonstrate that many of the seemingly timeless aspects of the press were at one time controversial inventions. The very structure of the modern news story—the summary lead, the inverted pyramid body—was a response to the gradual ascent of the journalist from court stenographer to influential middle-class interpreter and analyst of human events. Similarly, he notes that the news interview was a distinctly American invention of the second half of the nineteenth century. Europeans long held it to be a prime example of American democratic excess. Ultimately, of course, this “barbaric” invasion of privacy, with its preference for the instant, ill considered comment, became the distinctive and primary source material for journalists worldwide.

One subject of obvious importance to the historical role of the press in American political life, “muckraking,” makes several appearances but never receives the atten-

tion it would have in an original book on these themes. In a chapter comparing Lincoln Steffens and Harrison Salisbury, for example, Schudson’s focus is on the changing definition of the reporter and not enough on the idea of news as a political intervention itself. Even in the sections narrating the history of investigative journalism before and after Watergate, muckraking never gets focussed attention as the important experiment it was in creating a new kind of news of direct political influence.

Next, Schudson confronts several prominent myths about the news. His chief target is “telemetry,” the widespread belief that television has new and dangerous abilities to distort our political culture. Concern for the power of television should be qualified by studies that suggest people retain what they hear and read much better than what they see. He also is less dismissive of the visual information that television provides citizens. It was significant, for example, that Richard Nixon visibly suffered from insecurity while Robert Kennedy exuded confidence during the presidential debates.

In another chapter, co-authored with Elliot King, he presents evidence that Reagan’s much vaunted popularity and visual appeal was a myth. His popularity never matched even that of Jimmy Carter until the second half of his first term in office. By then, of course, his popularity was partly the product of several years of the press insisting that the “people” liked Reagan as much as they themselves did. Finally, he returns to the subject of one of his earlier books, Watergate, to expose the myths that have built up around perhaps the most famous role played by a reporter in America’s political history.[3]

The final three essays return to the collection’s central preoccupation: the role of the press in American political life, and specifically its responsibilities to the democratic citizen. An ardent foe of nostalgia for past democratic ages, Schudson devotes a whole chapter to Jurgen Habermas’s concept of a “public sphere,” a sphere not just of formal democracy but of specifically rational discourse among citizens. He criticizes historians such as Christopher Lasch for romanticizing the quality of political discourse in nineteenth century America, and in particular their admiration for audiences of day-long speeches. Such events were most likely not experienced in the high-minded way that such accounts assume, nor are they unheard of in more recent periods, as teach-ins, peace marches, and so forth amply demonstrate.

Unfortunately, his debunking leaves little room here or elsewhere for integrating a more realistic version of the “public sphere” into his analysis of the role of the

press in a democracy. In fact, the phrase does not reappear in the argument of the other essays in the book, a missed opportunity that is most sorely felt in the concluding essay with its analysis of the similar by not identical concept of “classical democracy.”

In the realist spirit of master journalist Walter Lippmann, he asks whether the “informational citizen,” that ideal construction populating so many critiques of American democracy, has ever existed or could ever exist. His answer to the first question is yes: on certain issues, citizens do rely on the press to provide information on which to base their decisions. Elections, scandals, and wars create widespread interest. Moreover, individual businesses, intellectuals, policy makers, or citizens are highly motivated to pay attention to stories that affect them.

Schudson creatively reconciles realist and classical views of democracy when he concludes that the press has a duty to act “schizophrenically”: to work “as if classical democracy were within reach and simultaneously to work as if a large, informed, and involved electorate were not possible” (p. 223). In the latter case, the press itself would become a kind of virtual “people” holding officials accountable to their own and democratic standards.

The Power Of News is a series of engaging sorties against popular myths and simplifications about the American press. As a book, it suffers unsurprisingly from some repetition of points and analytical dead ends. Like the original articles, however, each chapter has a lively, simple style and present engaging puzzles. Schudson uses sources well known to scholars, but he fruitfully and suggestively brings together three literatures usually kept separate: communications, sociology, and American political history.

This collection will be of obvious relevance, then, to journalism and communications students. In several places, Schudson makes specific recommendations to journalists and their teachers, such as sabbaticals for journalists and a list of seven habits for truly effective journalists.[4] Impressively, as I noted earlier, several of the essays in this book will be of great interest to political historians as blueprints for bringing the press back

in to the story of American political culture. For general and scholarly readers, this entertaining volume promises to banish from their minds (and perhaps even their lectures) many commonplace myths about the press. Perhaps most importantly, Schudson’s fusion of skepticism about the informational citizen and the public sphere and hardy idealism about the importance of such democratic fictions provides an original lens through which citizens might better judge of the “power of news.”[5]

Notes:

[1]. The concept of culture here acts, as it often does, as a powerful interdisciplinary magnet, drawing together the insights of separate, necessarily reductionist disciplines such as sociology, economics, and communications. The final product of a cultural analysis, however, can be maddeningly fuzzy. To sharpen the focus of his “cultural analysis,” Schudson writes primarily on political “hard news” and only mentions the vital powers of the press to entertain, build community, or simply gossip.

[2]. There is an expanded discussion of the history of the news in Schudson’s published dissertation, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

[3]. Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[4]. The seven qualities that Schudson would like to see in journalism, some of which are mutually contradictory, are briefly: 1) fair and fully informative; 2) interpretive and contextual; 3) openness to multiple perspectives; 4) market and interest driven; 5) representative of the public interest; 6) empathetic; and 7) encouraging of democratic dialogue (pp. 28-9).

[5]. Michael Schudson and Robert Karl Manoff, editors, *Reading the News: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

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