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❖ **Schudson, Michael - Why democracies Need an Unlovable Press, Polity, Cambridge, 2008 (pp. 147) ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4452-3**

Reviewed by Antonio Castillo

Michael Schudson's *Why democracies need an unlovable press* is a highly informative and important book. A sociologist and media scholar, Schudson has assembled a series of essays examining the relationship between journalism and democracy. While predominantly American – journalism and democracy – the book presents an argument that is relevant to other democratic political contexts. The author contends that an independent and inquisitive journalism is vital for a healthy democracy. The book's objective is – as he points out – "to understand journalism's special place in democracies" (p.3).

Michael Schudson is Professor of Communication and Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of – among other books – the *Power of News* (Harvard University Press: 1996) and *Sociology of News* (W.W. Norton & Co.: 2003). In *Why democracies need an unlovable press*, Schudson approaches the relationship between journalism and democracy through ten chapters. They are self-contained and independent essays that examine – among other themes – the role of the political journalist and the coverage of politics in a democratic context.

The chapter titled "Six or seven things news can do for democracy" (p.11), is perhaps one that best encapsulates the function that journalists – especially political journalists – can play in order to "serve in a democracy" (p. 12). The author argues that the function of journalists in a democratic society goes from information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum to mobilization. The seventh function "should lead journalists to cover more carefully some institutions and relationships that today they take for granted or ignore" (p. 24).

While the institutions "taken for granted" and identified by Schudson are American – FBI, Department of Justice, Federal Election Commission etc. – they also resonate in different democratic contexts (including Australia). In the context of the major financial scandals where regulators failed to regulate – in the Bernard Madoff \$50 billion financial scam the Securities and Exchange Commission failed dramatically as regulator – this seventh function is timely.

Chapter 5 – which carries the name of the book – is a particularly insightful essay. In this chapter the author examines the "press as an establishment institution" (p. 51). In this section, Schudson contends that journalists as part of the establishment are not free from institutional constraints. "Journalists are not free agents. They are constrained by a set of complex

institutional relations that lead them to reproduce day after day the opinions and views of established figures, especially high government officials," he writes (p. 61).

In chapter 7, "What is unusual about covering politics as usual" (p. 77), Schudson magisterially dissects the way journalists and journalism organizations approached September 11. "This terrible tragedy for the world proved a great opportunity for journalism," he writes (p. 79). It was a transformative challenge to American journalism. In this chapter, Schudson observes: "for two very long weeks, journalists wrote in a way that emphasized not only factual accuracy and analytical power but human connection to their community" (p.80).

The post September 11 period saw – as the author argues – the emergence of a journalistic consensus where information and analysis were not enough. There was something else. Journalists began providing to their audiences stories that conveyed comfort and reassurance. And something else: journalists abandoned the neutral stance and assumed a "pastoral stance" (p. 82).

This is not new in American journalism. Schudson reminds us that US journalism abandons instinctively its neutral stance in three circumstances: in moments of tragedy (for example the coverage of the mourning of the September 11 victims), in cases of public danger (natural disasters or terrorist attacks), and during threats to national security (the author cites the example of the failed US 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion). September 11 was, as the author points out, a combination of these three factors. In this context news reporting "after September 11 turned toward a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information" (p. 83).

Schudson goes on to identify a second phenomenon that occurred among journalists during the post-September 11 attacks. Journalists "liked the new intimacy of the consensual 'we'" (p. 83). As the author puts it: "They feel connected and important to their audience. They feel appreciated as they rarely do" (p. 83). This journalism of consensus soon began draw to a close after the US invasion of Afghanistan. The 'we' – or the pastoral role taken up by journalists in the post-September 11 scenario – was unsustainable.

Schudson doesn't hide his glee when this consensus was over. "It was wonderful to see all that messiness again, all that conflict, all that stuff that makes people turn in disgust from the back-biting, back-stabbing, power grabbing low-down of politics," he said (p. 87). It is the return to normality. It is what is expected of political journalism after all, debunk consensus, encourage dissent and expose citizens to a variety of political views.

The final chapter – "The trouble with experts and why democracies need them" – will resonate in our local journalistic and political landscape. It examines the role of the "expert" or the professional authority. In the Australian context this is especially prevalent in The Australian newspaper (this doesn't mean we don't see 'experts' in the rest of the print media; but The Australian has a stable of regular experts, and a few of them come from academia).

Schudson reminds us that Walter Lippman, in his seminal work *Public Opinion* (1922), observes: "ordinary citizens do not perceive the world directly but only through the set of forms and stereotypes provided by the press" (p. 108). While Schudson doesn't precisely speak of the journalist-expert (e.g. the political editor and the political opinion writer), his approach could be extrapolated to the role of the press in providing 'expert' political information, opinion and analysis. This is especially the case – as he argues – in the three services that experts can provide to democracy: "Experts can speak the truth of power," "Experts can clarify the grounds of public debate and so improve the capacity of both legislators and the general public to engage effectively in democratic decision-making," and "Experts can diagnose opportunity and

diagnose injustice" (pp. 118-119).

Michael Schudson's book is a terrific read. It is insightful and scholarly solid. The prose is elegant and accessible to any reader. And while mainly an American case – as mentioned earlier in this review – his central argument is greatly relevant to other contexts where the press can provide a major service to democracy.

About the Author

Antonio Castillo is a journalist and academic at the University of Sydney, Australia.

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