WHY JOURNALISM STILL MATTERS

MICHAEL SCHUDSON
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Michael Schudson

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This book reflects on matters I have pondered for many years – from the largely salutary (but consider chapter 4) professionalization of journalism to the misunderstandings of politics that arise from the overemphasis on the “informed citizen” as the moral ideal for democracy. The book integrates some other topics that I should have pondered more (populism, the place of news in everyday life, what technology does and does not “do” to social experience, and whether the “slowness” of democracy should be recognized as a great virtue or as a problem). The significance of professionalism is an underlying theme throughout, and this goes back in my own writing 40 years, but the topic is more fresh and more urgent today than ever. I have been enabled to reconsider it by teaching for the past decade at a “professional school” – the Columbia Journalism School, and I am grateful to the Journalism School and to Columbia University for having provided me this opportunity.

At the same time that I have become an up-close local, observing journalists and journalism, I have become more engaged as a cosmopolitan in an international community of research and thinking in “journalism studies.” I am grateful to my colleagues (especially Todd Gitlin, Richard John, and Andie Tucher) in our Journalism School-centered boutique-style doctoral program in communication, to our remarkable
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This book would not exist were it not for the director of Polity Press, John Thompson, whose encouragement over many years has been invaluable. In this case, he believed that this volume could and should stretch beyond providing a handy piece of luggage for collecting and transmitting already published papers; it should propose new ideas, recasts old ones, and articulate what it means to claim that journalism still matters. I am grateful also to the excellent staff at Polity, including copyeditor Sarah Dancy.

Thanks to John, there is new life in this book. It is not the only new life in my life. My two-and-a-half-year-old marriage to Julia Sonnevend is new to me still, full of fine adventures that open me to the world afresh, and with a love that only deepens. That love is now enhanced by Noah Peter Schudson, six miraculous months old. If he is not headline news, I don’t know what is.
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Introduction

Does journalism matter? More than ever. But to reach that conclusion requires knowing what it matters to. And to make a case for journalism’s enduring importance, I must also explain what I mean by “journalism” at a time when its borders are more ill-defined than they have ever been before. There are various journalisms, many of them useful, including explicitly partisan journalism, but the journalism whose importance I will make a case for is what I call professional journalism. Professional journalism has been defined simply and, I think, exactly by media scholar Daniel Hallin as journalism in which reporters are “committed more strongly to the norms of the profession than to political ideas.” This is the sort of journalism, more than any other kind of commentary on contemporary affairs, that still matters.

To introduce what seems to me vital about journalism, it may help to look at one small decision in the writing of one news story. Consider the story by reporter Richard Pérez-Peña in the New York Times October 19, 2017: “Second Federal Judge Blocks the Third Revision of the Travel Ban.” The story focuses on the decision just issued by Theodore Chuang, a federal judge in Maryland. Pérez-Peña puts that decision in context. He explains that Judge Derrick Watson in Hawaii was the first judge to pronounce illegal President Donald Trump’s third effort at banning travel to the United States from half
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a dozen majority Muslim countries. Judge Watson had held that it violates a 1965 federal immigration statute prohibiting discrimination based on national origin and he therefore issued a temporary restraining order. Judge Chuang broadened the grounds for holding up Travel Ban 3, finding it arguably illegal on constitutional as well as statutory grounds, and he granted an injunction for an indefinite period.

Pérez-Peña presents this news in flat, emotionless prose, a first indicator that this is what readers should recognize as professional, “objective” journalism. In a second mark of objectivity, he quotes both a plaintiff in the Maryland case supporting Judge Chuang’s decision and a Justice Department spokesman criticizing it – standard “let’s hear from both sides” writing.

But then, in the fifth paragraph, appears something that breaks from the straightforward matter-of-fact rendition of what happened with a statement that the judges in Hawaii and Maryland who ruled against the travel ban had been appointed by President Barack Obama. That is a fact. The question is why Pérez-Peña mentions it. Here’s the full sentence:

The district judges, both appointed by President Barack Obama, had ruled against an earlier attempt at a travel ban, as had the federal appellate courts for their regions of the country, and the appeals were consolidated and taken up by the Supreme Court, which allowed some parts of the ban to go into effect, pending consideration of the case.

This 59-word sentence is tedious, it’s long-winded, but it lays out the chain of events clearly. But then what are those six words – “both appointed by President Barack Obama” – doing? Why does Pérez-Peña interrupt the chronology to insert this bit of history about how the two judges reached their positions?

“Both appointed by President Barack Obama” gives readers sympathetic to the Trump travel bans an explanation outside of the law for why Judges Watson and Chuang ruled as they did. Pérez-Peña does not claim that the judges were guided by their presumably liberal political preferences rather than by a fair-minded interpretation of the law, but he equips readers to entertain this possibility. He answers a question that some
readers might have had in mind. I, for one, had exactly that question in mind: were these judges appointed by Republican or by Democratic presidents? I hoped, given my own wish that the travel bans be struck down and that Republican-leaning as well as Democratic-leaning judges would see in them a violation of First Amendment protections of religious freedom, that the judges had been appointed by Republican George W. Bush.

Pérez-Peña could have told us different relevant facts about the two judges. He could have noted that Judge Watson, a native Hawaiian, was the son of a police officer, the first in his family to attend college, a graduate of Harvard Law School. He could have mentioned that Watson’s nomination was confirmed by a Senate vote of 94-0. He could have told us that Judge Chuang was the son of Taiwanese immigrants, another Harvard Law School graduate, and from 2009 to 2014 deputy general counsel of the Department of Homeland Security. But Pérez-Peña made a choice and the choice was to recognize in a polarized political world that readers would likely be more interested to know that President Obama appointed these judges rather than that they had outstanding legal credentials and personal connections to law enforcement or homeland security. In offering some context for Judge Chuang’s decision, the story goes beyond the simplest “just the facts” account of events. In offering this context rather than other possible contexts, Pérez-Peña makes a decision about how to frame the story and how to guide readers in understanding it. Pérez-Peña or his editors chose a context that recognizes a polarized political world.

The added six words efficiently state a fact. But that is not all they do. They recognize as any reasonable person must that political orientation is, whether we like it or not, a factor in judicial decisions. And in this case they also offer a subtext – a demonstration of the fair-mindedness of the New York Times that President Donald Trump repeatedly accuses of encouraging a “witch hunt” against him and publishing an endless stream of “fake news.” Acting in a fair-minded way is exactly what news stories (not editorials) in a leading newspaper should be doing, after all. But there is possible damage to our shared civic discourse in the insinuation that judges ignore the law and follow their political preferences; this is
cynical in implicitly informing readers that only politics, not institutions, matter. The text of “both appointed by President Barack Obama” is unobjectionable, but the subtext is that judges do the political bidding of the presidents who appoint them. This is sometimes true. It is sometimes false – Franklin Roosevelt is probably still rolling over in his grave for appointing Felix Frankfurter to the Supreme Court, a justice who often lined up against the Court’s liberals; Dwight Eisenhower likewise regretted appointing Earl Warren and William J. Brennan to the Supreme Court, as did Richard Nixon, for appointing Harry Blackmun, a life-long Republican, who on the Supreme Court crafted the majority opinion in Roe v. Wade establishing the constitutionality of laws making some abortions legal.

Whether or not Pérez-Peña made a wise decision to insert “both appointed by President Barack Obama,” I feel confident that he wrote not as a political liberal or a political conservative. He wrote as a professional journalist. This is the professionalism that President Donald Trump and others on the right now dismiss as fake, although it is important to note that many on the left have made similar charges over the years against the mainstream media, arguing that they are centrist or even center-right in their implicit view of the world, marginalizing legitimate views on the left.

About the so-called “liberal media”: Who in the US presidential elections of 2016 complained the loudest about the bias of the mainstream media? Donald Trump takes the gold medal. But the silver medal would likely go to Bernie Sanders and his supporters. If critics from the Sanders and Trump camps would only pool their rhetorical resources, they would have a case that there is an anti-populist bias in the leading national press. Margaret Canovan, a British political theorist writing in the 1990s, observed that populist movements typically have charismatic leaders “who can make politics personal and immediate instead of being remote and bureaucratic.” Amateurism and lack of political experience then become “recommendations.” She wrote that the degree of personal power that populist leaders attain is “hard to reconcile with democratic aspirations.” At the same time, she suggested, democracies need and sometimes get in populism an “upsurge of faith as a means of renewal.” I do not doubt that populism
may provide a bracing shot of emotional color into institutional grayness, but it is no substitute for and can be a threat to the integrity of the institutions that sustain democracy.

And this – democracy – is what journalism matters to. Journalism is among the institutions necessary for sustaining democracy, specifically, journalism empowered by legally protected freedom of the press and enabled by sufficient economic support to pursue the news coverage that matters to democracy. The commercial backbone of journalism, especially in the United States, has been undermined by the capabilities of the internet (see chapter 7) but old line news organizations have shown a capacity to produce great journalism even with the cost savings of staff reductions, while some online-only news organizations, often supported by philanthropic contributions and other business model innovations, have also done outstanding energetic and original reporting. In part thanks to the very internet that contributed to the economic crisis of newspaper-centered news organizations, professional news organizations have been able to produce journalism as good or better than ever with leaner staffs.

We should not get too high-minded in talking about journalism. Journalism does many things that are not closely connected to democracy, if connected at all. For instance, it provides bits and pieces of novelty that fit into odd moments of a person’s day and it has been doing that for a long time, certainly as far back as 1945 when Bernard Berelson documented during a New York newspaper strike that readers did not miss following any particular story or topic so much as they missed the time-filling enjoyment that news offers. What is new now, as people check and recheck their smartphones throughout the day, is only the frequency and the brevity of these moments. What was a ritual – the newspaper with breakfast, the television news at the dinner hour, radio news in the car – has become a persistent itch that needs to be recurrently scratched.

Journalism, past and present, also provides a location for advertising and therefore presumably a stimulus to economic activity. In addition, journalism is both itself entertainment and a source of information about entertainment – the coverage of sports, books, music, theater. Journalism gives people information about the weather, about automobile traffic, and
other topics from new fashions to new technologies to medical breakthroughs that matter to people more on a day to day basis than news of politics.

Where there is not democracy, there is still journalism. Even so, in non-democracies journalists may be waiting for democracy, hoping to be freed to write as conscience dictates, not as party functionaries insist. Journalists as a species, whether working in democracies or in autocratic states, aspire to independent reporting and commentary on current affairs. Reporters in autocratic states may have to work within the constraints imposed by their governments, but they tend to look with real longing toward the greater range of motion that journalists count on in democracies. In contrast, I do not know of any reporters in democracies who yearn to become state propagandists. I know of none who thirst to trade in their substantial level of freedom for immobilizing fetters. Of course, some will barter independence for access, fawning and flattering power despite themselves. But I think they know, somewhere in their hearts, that this violates or threatens to violate the deep strength of their vocation.

Journalism may exist without democracy, but can democracy exist without journalism? Not, I think, in the contemporary world. Journalism grows only more important as an institution of organized skepticism that is central to democratic governance today. As I argue in Chapter 10, one of the key features of representative democracies is not that they empower the people directly to elect their governors, but that they enjoin citizens to be skeptical of the people they have elected. The question of journalism’s role in democracy today is befuddled by the vagueness of what the term “journalism” refers to, and that only grows more fuzzy and more contested in the digital age. The line between reporter and bystander blurs when every bystander equipped with a smartphone can send a photograph or a text message instantly to networks that span the globe. The line dividing reporters from advertisers, once fiercely maintained at self-respecting news organizations, has been redrawn to permit so-called “native advertising” that masquerades as news with the full cooperation of the news organizations. And the line between reporting and marketing has blurred when reporters are enjoined by their employers to promote their news stories by posts on social media
that simplify, sensationalize, or personalize in messages what they had written in standard professional fashion.

Meanwhile, “democracy” has become too often a largely ceremonial term for journalists and politicians alike, piously invoked but not properly understood. To think usefully about how journalism relates or should relate to democracy, we must consider what sense of these terms we have in mind. With “democracy,” the problem is, as we see more and more, and as Fareed Zakaria named it in 1997, that at a time of resurgent “illiberal democracy” around the world, it is urgent to recognize that “democracy” has long been a misleading shorthand for the longer, more awkward and mysterious phrase, “liberal democracy.”

“Liberal democracy” refers not to democracy that political liberals favor any more than political conservatives do; it refers to a popular election-centered form of government with protections for individual liberties baked into the constitution, into the legal order, and into deep expectations and customs that even electoral majorities are not permitted to revoke. Liberal democracy is not simply a system of competitive elections – after all, a system of competitive elections brought Adolph Hitler to power. It is a system for limiting the capacity of governments – even governments elected by majorities in competitive elections, to trample on the rights of individuals and groups who are not part of those majorities. Until journalists recognize they should not be allegiant to “democracy” shorn of the “liberal” modifier, they cannot understand what their work has to do with democratic ideals.

For me, the sourcebook for thinking through journalism’s democratic role remains Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. At different times, different observations made there by Lippmann leap out as cautions for us a century later. I call attention to one of these in Chapter 2, where, in my fanciful reading of what Lippmann’s ghost might want to tell us, the ghost notes *Public Opinion*’s much quoted remark that journalism “is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision,” but he then urges attention to the sentence that immediately precedes that famous one: “The press is no substitute for institutions.”

In the context of 2017 and 2018 and Donald Trump’s United States – with parallel concerns in Brexit-era Britain, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, Recep
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Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel, Vladimir Putin’s Russia, and resurgent extreme right-wing thrusts toward political power in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, and Austria – it is vital to recognize the importance of institutions. Chief among them are an independent judiciary, the rule of law, a civil service loyal to an oath of office rather than to an incumbent prime minister or president, and an independent press dedicated to verifiable truth and protected by civil liberties enforceable by law.

Among the missing elements of democracy in populist regimes is respect for independent media. A recent study of how left-wing populist presidents in Latin America use Twitter finds in their tweets an obsession with responding to the latest news and an equal obsession with attacking enemies, prominent among them the news media. There seems no tolerance in the outlook of populist leaders for independent thinkers or independent institutions. They live in a Manichean world – if you are not for me, you are against me. All interest is self-interest. All knowledge is only a disguise for power.

For many political theorists, a glory of liberal societies is the space between the state, the market, and the private life of families – at its best, the flourishing of a vibrant associational life or “civil society,” but this arena goes entirely unrecognized or, worse, gets vilified by populist leaders. The vilification typically focuses on news organizations, whether profitmaking, state-supported, or philanthropically underwritten. This is not surprising, certainly, but it is no less corrosive for being anticipated. And it is encouraged by a great but nonetheless double-edged development in journalism since the mid-twentieth century – the rise of what I call Objectivity 2.0. In Chapter 3, I provide an account of the rise of journalism as a profession in the United States, reaching a stage of self-consciousness in the 1920s with a broad acceptance of what I name Objectivity 1.0. In the twenties, as journalists went about their work, they felt themselves struggling to stay afloat in waters infested by the sharks of state propaganda and corporate public relations, all of them trying to bite off pieces of independent journalism for their own purposes. American journalists, in self-defense, settled into routines of verifying facts, of matching a quotation from a Democrat with a quotation from a Republican, a balancing to keep their
news from capture by the sharks. And this was the approach that came to maturity and self-confidence in the 1950s.

But then, in the late 1960s and 1970s, Objectivity 2.0 was overlaid atop of Objectivity 1.0, without erasing it. News à la Objectivity 2.0 became more probing and more analytical, sketching in a context for understanding events and not just a flat account of what happened yesterday. This greater emphasis on interpretation in reporting was sometimes justified in the newspaper world as a necessary move to give readers something they could not get from television, but it was much more than economics. It was part of a powerful cultural shift. Objectivity 2.0 news was not only more enterprising and investigative, not only more analytical, but more negative. From the 1960s to the 1990s, journalism became more and more critical of presidential candidates – and, let me underline this, increasingly negative about presidential candidates of both parties. Thomas Patterson’s analysis of Time and Newsweek reporting found 75 percent of “evaluative references” to presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were positive in 1960, but in the next 32 years they became much more negative and never again reached anything close to that 75 percent figure; in 1992 only 40 percent of evaluations of Bill Clinton and George Bush were positive. This was part of a move to hold power – left and right – to account, what former Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr. and his Washington Post colleague Robert Kaiser have called “accountability journalism.”

Pérez-Peña’s story on the Trump travel ban is largely written in a sophisticated version of Objectivity 1.0, but “both appointed by President Barack Obama” is a phrase that uses a fact to incorporate interpretation – not necessarily Pérez-Peña’s interpretation, but evoking for readers a possible interpretation they may or may not have considered. It is a subtle move. It takes the story into an Objectivity 2.0 mode where the reporter is well aware that news stories require contexts to be understandable. Sketching in context is a part of the reporter’s job where choices must be made and judgment must be exercised and there is no single best way to do this. But professionals at least have the training, the experience, and the social support of a newsroom to do it better than most amateurs could do with the same materials.
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Journalists must make judgments. The task to which they devote themselves is to do that well. They recognize, at least intermittently, the pitfalls in their paths. Journalists – along with civics teachers, reformers, scholars, and patriotic orators – are less likely to recognize that they should not accept that journalism’s larger objective is to enable and enhance democracy if, by democracy, they mean only majority rule in contested elections. The American founders did not seek democracy in this sense (they actually worked to avoid it). The US Constitution is not a text for democracy in this sense, either. (For a brief overview of the changing ideals of citizenship and democracy in US history, see Chapter 8.) And journalists today should have no truck with democracy when it is shorn of its “liberal” modifier. They should instead embrace “liberal democracy.” For the sake of liberty, the protection of minorities, and the advancement of a decent society, they should help us relearn these civic values.

Not all of the essays gathered here are fully cognizant of this. Only the most recent of the essays, for obvious reasons, recognize that what has been a problem for some years or decades in Hungary, Turkey, Russia, and elsewhere has become an American problem too. Mr. Trump’s electoral triumph for the US, like the Brexit vote for Britain, has been enormously clarifying on this point. From now on, even if Donald Trump should be removed from office through impeachment proceedings or should fail to be reelected, it is clear that Americans are not immune to vulgar breeds of illiberalism.

What “Liberal” Means in “Liberal Democracy”

A liberal democracy is democratic if it empowers the general public to exercise a primary role in selecting the individuals who will hold public office, doing so through a political system that permits two or more political parties and that equips the public and its parties with the freedom of speech and association to compete for office. A liberal democracy is liberal if it empowers the elected leadership only within the boundaries of recognizing citizens’ civil and political rights, honoring the institutional divisions of governmental power that assure the
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protection of those rights, and working within the rule of law to protect both institutions and individuals even when doing so violates the electoral judgment of the people.

Journalists seeking to help build a good society through their work should understand these definitional requirements of liberal democracy. They should regularly remind their audiences that in liberal democracy people through elections entrust leaders with great authority, but it is an authority delimited and confined. The news media should of course recognize the legitimacy of elected officials and the officials they appoint, and treat them with respect accordingly, but at the same time they should grant them only the most provisional trust. Leaders in democracies are elected not to do their will, but to do their job.

Democratic leaders can be held to their rightful task only in societies where there is a healthy web of accountability – a set of quasi-independent institutions of audit and review inside government, a set of independent institutions in civil society dedicated to the review and critique of power and often prepared to go to court in defense of and in advance- ment of their findings of criminal or negligent acts by elected officials, and news organizations with the power, authority, professionalism, and persistence to make public the shortcomings of those who govern.

I think most Americans – and certainly most American journalists looking at Washington today – feel as bewildered as Hillary Rodham Clinton about “what happened” in the 2016 election. We thought we knew this country reasonably well, but awakened to a realization of how limited our understanding has been. Our brains are beset, our stomachs unsettled, we cannot digest what we have to constitutionally swallow – even as knowledge accumulates that this election was in some measure tainted, if not stolen, by Russian interference – interference that, at this writing, seems to have been welcomed and encouraged by Trump campaign officials, including Donald Trump, Jr., at a Trump Tower meeting with a Russian who promised to provide incriminating information about Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Two days after that meeting, Donald Jr. had a phone call with his father (with lawyers listening in at both ends of the call) that he is unwilling to discuss before congressional investigators. The question, of course, is what the younger Trump said to his