

Thinking about journalism beyond technology

Pensando o jornalismo além da tecnologia

Pensando en el periodismo más allá de la tecnología

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442024111en>

Michael Schudson

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0086-0743>

Columbia University, Journalism School, New York, Estados Unidos

Interview granted to:

Otávio Daros

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0738-8207>

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social, Porto Alegre, RS - Brasil



Michael Schudson at the COMPÓS International Seminar in 2011 | Credits: Mario Arruda and Ricardo Giacomoni

Born in 1946, Michael Schudson has been one of the most referenced names in the field of journalism studies since the publication of *Discovering the news* (1978) — a classic that was translated into Portuguese by Editora Vozes in 2010. The result of his doctorate at Harvard, the book is an analysis of the emergence of the ideal of objectivity in the North American press at the end of the 19th century, and develops the argument that its crystallization as a journalistic value occurred after the First World War, as a rhetorical defense against the growing influence of government propaganda and corporate publications.

This and other contributions that followed guaranteed him a distinguished academic career, through the University of Chicago and the University of California, San Diego, where he became professor emeritus after almost 30 years of work. In 2009, he began teaching full-time at the pioneering Columbia Journalism School. In the following interview, conducted in November 2021 and revisited in July 2024, we talk about the work developed as a long-time researcher in the field.

OD: Could you tell us about the beginning of your intellectual trajectory, and your graduate at Harvard University? What motivated you to study journalism at that time? Were there any obstacles to studying a topic like journalism at a university as traditional as Harvard, or not?

MS: I was an undergrad major in sociology and anthropology at Swarthmore College. I applied to grad programs in sociology, social anthropology, and history of ideas and in the end chose social anthropology at Harvard, changing to sociology in my second year. My adviser, Daniel Bell, was a journalist (for *Fortune Magazine*, among others) before becoming an academic, so he had no problem with my writing about journalism. But my dissertation was not about journalism as such — it was a study in the history of ideas and specifically the history of a value or ideal: how did professions (law and journalism) come to believe that they should seek to be “objective” or dispassionate in their work? I saw law and journalism as case studies in the sociology of professions. And I chose them because Watergate was happening at the time (1972-1974) and journalism and law were both very much a focal point of the news of the day.

OD: Since then, what understanding have you cultivated about the profession that interests us here?

MS: Journalism is different things to different people. In small towns, it is interesting because it is news about people you know or at least people you know of. In cities and nationally, it is a more ambitious report of current events of broad interest — local, regional, national, international — and not only what just happened but trends (what “is happening” and may happen tomorrow) and opinions (about what should happen or what should not happen).

Increasingly, it has become one of multiple “knowledge professions” — along with recordkeeping and archiving in governments and universities, along with scientific and medical research and practice; along with academic professions, and others — and journalists interact with all these other professions more than ever before. There remains a certain amount of contempt among academics for journalists, I think — matched by journalists’ contempt for the “ivory tower” academics — but more and more these largely separated knowledge professions interact and come to appreciate one another.

OD: Methodologically, your work has been marked by the dialogue between the perspectives of sociology and history. How do you analyze the development of media studies and journalism from these perspectives in the United States?

MS: The “media” remain a marginal topic in both sociology and history. They are not a recognized focal point or subfield either in history or in sociology departments. Many sociologists and historians who write on journalism in the end find positions in journalism schools or communication/media departments. And there, I believe, the work has grown better and better.

When I published my first book, there was no such thing as “journalism studies” — no ICA division of that name, no *Journalism* journal, *Journalism Studies* journal, nor the many others soon to follow. There was *Journalism Quarterly*, the publication of the Association for Journalism Education, later the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). But, frankly, it was a cloistered publication, speaking only to J-School faculty, largely out of broader conversations about “the public sphere” in political and social theory or “professions and professionalization” in sociology, or the influential work on Benedict Anderson on “imagined communities” or the work of Bourdieu or Foucault or the studies in science and technology studies, etc.

Perhaps I am unkind to the J-School tradition that looked almost exclusively to a J-School audience, but I think the infusion of sociologists into the journalism studies conversations (like Paolo Mancini from Italy) and political scientists (like Daniel C. Hallin) and sociologists (Todd Gitlin, Rod Benson) and historians (Richard John, Andie Tucher) who migrated into communication studies or journalism or media studies programs added enormously to the richness of journalism studies and helped make it a lively intellectual domain.

OD: A clear sign of this understanding appears, in my view, in *The sociology of news production* (1989), an article in which you discuss contributions from the social sciences to explain news production processes.

MS: Although I believe the subject is already exhausted, I would just add that in a subsequent revision of this work I made a consideration that I think is important: even with all four approaches I talked about (political, economic, sociological and cultural), they provide an incomplete coverage of what journalism is because they don't fully appreciate the problem of "events," the very core of what it is that most journalism focuses on. I mean, social science generally seeks broad causes for the trajectory of human affairs: economic, technological, social, political, or cultural explanations. But "events" may lie outside of these general causes and still matter — some are predictable, but the most interesting ones are not, they are the very heart of what upsets the apple carts of social and political theory.

OD: And how would you define your perspective?

MS: I would say my theoretical perspective is pluralista. I think economic, political, technological, social, cultural, and the unanticipated — events and persons — are causal factors in human affairs. My only precept is the one I learned in a drawing class I took: "draw what you see." Draw what you see and not what you think you are supposed to see. It's a great lesson to keep in mind — and it is incredibly difficult to keep in mind.

OD: In his 1978 book, his historical-sociological analysis builds the argument that the value of objectivity in journalism crystallized in the United States based on specific political and cultural circumstances. This means that, at the limit of interpretation, the North American model could not be fully implemented in any other system, although, as we know, it has exerted influence. Have you ever been interested in studying how this has occurred, differently, in the press of other countries?

MS: It's a good question but my knowledge of other systems, especially beyond Europe, is pretty limited for me to come up with an informed answer. So let me answer in retrospect: some of the apparently simplest elements of US journalism were social practices, not philosophical beliefs — interviewing as a practice, rather than "objectivity" as an occupational ideal and ideology. US journalists began to use interviewing widely in the 1880s and 1890s and European visitors found this a despicable practice, not appropriately respectful of the celebrities and politicians interviewed. Only when US journalists flocked to Europe 1914-18 to cover World War I did they model interviewing for European counterparts and the practice spread.

"Objectivity" became a self-conscious ideology in the 1920s as a defensive ideal, an ideological barrier to protect journalism from efforts to manipulate news presented by governments with their propaganda and commercial organizations with their public relations. "We control our own news acolumns" was the message journalists in the US began to send to these outside forces. This seems to have influenced British journalism to some extent but continental journalisms less so where the interpretive essay rather than the relatively detached, interview and fact-based story had greater acceptance.

Still, the turn in recent decades to more investigative journalism has a global reach, as perhaps best illustrated by the ICIJ — International Consortium of Investigative Journalists — where scores of news organizations from around the world have worked together on major investigative stories and published in these multiple outlets the reports of their findings.

OD: Returning to your work, although multifaceted, you seem to make a transition from the sociology of news production to political history, including the press. *The good citizen: a history of American civic life* (1998) and *Why democracies need an unlovable press* (2008) would be examples of this change in focus. Or don't you see it that way?

MS: Both journalism and journalism studies in the US take it for granted that the aim of journalism should be to provide the information that enables people to become “informed citizens.” But my *The Good Citizen* argues that this takes up only one of four models that have operated — all of them still operating in some fashion — in US political life since the country’s founding, the “informed citizen” model that became prominent only with the Progressive Era (1890-1920s or so).

In the 1790s and early 1800s, a “good Citizen” was expected to defer to the wealthy men who stood for public office; voting was about selecting a person of character for office, not about being informed about policy. For most of the 1800s, the good citizen was an enthusiastic partisan loyal to one of the newly founded political parties — politics had become a kind of team sport. In the period 1890-1920, there was increasing criticism of this kind of politics and a growing emphasis that a citizen should be well-informed about the issues of the day.

This model has continued to this day but in the 1950s and 1960s it was supplemented by a more activist and sometimes rebellious model that emphasized commitment to a model of a “rights-bearing Citizen” able to stand up for oneself to protect one’s own legitimate rights or the rights of others — the civil rights movement became a powerful model where citizenship was exercised outside the realm of the political parties.

Today I don’t see this as a transition exactly but as a further exploration of culture and values in US history – the history of objectivity in journalism in *Discovering the news*; of the concept of the informed citizen in *The Good Citizen*; of the late 20th century emergence of transparency as a value sought in public policy in *Rise of the right to know* (2015) and next, if I ever get to it, the rise of “critical inquiry” as a leading value in higher education.

OD: The 2008 book begins with the statement that “journalism does not create democracy, and democracy does not invent journalism.” How do you historically perceive the role of the press in a democratic state? Has that role changed or remained relatively the same?

MS: For me, it changed with the 1960s/70s as US journalism re-professionalized, adding to a pretty narrow “he said/she said” version of objectivity a deeper and more challenging version that provides analysis, interpretation, context to news stories. For me, the paper I published with Katherine Fink in 2014 was key to that change.

Based on content analysis by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* — as a representative regional metropolitan daily newspaper —, we show that there has been a huge growth in what, for lack of a better term, we call “contextual reporting.” In contextual reporting, the journalists offered interpretation or analysis to frame their stories, reporting not only what politicians said but trying to explain the reasons they said what they did.

OD: When talking about the relationship between press and democracy, it is perhaps important to address the work of Walter Lippmann, who has been an important reference in your research. In your opinion, what would be the main point of approximation and the distance between you two regarding the role of the press?

MS: I greatly admire Walter Lippmann. He combined a philosophical and psychological depth with a close engagement with the daily affairs of national (US) political life for half a century. He knew politics and politicians first-hand — where I have only observed them from afar —, he believed in the value of democracy — as do I.

I am most struck, in re-reading his *Public opinion* of 1922 and his *The phantom public* of 1925 at his clear-sighted recognition that experts as well as ordinary citizens have limited comprehension of public affairs. The difference, he wrote, that matters for building a democratic society is not between elites and masses or between experts and ordinary citizens but between “insiders” and “outsiders” on the question at hand.

While we still have to build a better vocabulary for all this, Lippmann articulated these better than anyone else I know in the American scene — and he did it 100 years ago. Lippmann himself was as much insider as outsider himself in American politics — I have been only an outsider. And he did not anticipate just how distrustful, skeptical,

xenophobic, and even anti-democratic our public culture would turn — from the Vietnam War on, and I certainly do not know what he would have made of our media culture today. That’s our task. But I think we should take inspiration from his pragmatic realism in assessing where we are and where the media stand in today’s world.

OD: And what contributions would you highlight from the new generations of academics? Do you see the formation of an intellectual nucleus for the study of journalism?

MS: I’m not sure if there’s an intellectual nucleus. I guess *Discovering the news* would be part of it, if it exists. So would Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing media systems* that seems to me as influential a work in journalism studies as there is. *Four theories of the press* was influential in an earlier day but I think has been fully superseded by Hallin and Mancini that is necessary background to the now flourishing literature on comparative cross-national studies of journalism and news audiences. I find Karin Wahl-Jorgensen’s work on emotion in journalism to be a key work to reckon with — and its emphasis on story, narrative, emotional connection (rather than just informational connection) of news to audiences. An adjacent literature on “media events”, , such as that of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, seems to me also fruitful and, like Wahl-Jorgensen, opening up journalism studies in valuable ways.

OD: Before concluding, I would like to say that your article *Second thoughts: Schudson on Schudson* (2017) is an extremely healthy intellectual stance for the development of our field, because instead of hiding, you seek to expose and discuss the criticisms that have been made of your work. This is not about agreeing or disagreeing, but reflecting. One of the most recent critics, Christoph Raetzsch (2017), claims that your work underestimates the importance of the technology category. What is your point of view on this?

MS: I’m a pluralist in most matters of sociological explanation — human societies and human actions are complex. Technology matters. Economics matters. Politics. Society and social relations. Culture. And — as neither historians nor social scientists know how to handle — so do events and individuals, the accidents of life that have causal force of their own. They all matter. Do I fail to give full weight to technology? Maybe. But I remain troubled by what seems to me a blind acceptance in popular culture and even in academic culture that “technology” is the overwhelming force in our own day. I agree that it’s very important. But it never has been and it never will be all-important.

OD: the same time, you seem to share an optimistic view on the future of journalism. Why will journalism still matter tomorrow?

MS: Yes. I think anyone who reads newspapers from the 1950s would see instantly that today’s journalism is vastly superior to them — better sourced, better written, more intellectually ambitious, more engaging, deeper, more inclusive of what counts as politically relevant, obviously more inclusive by race, gender, class of what and who deserves news coverage. People worry about how and where audiences get their news today — fair enough, but too often they ignore how much easier it is than it used to be for JOURNALISTS to get their stories! Thank you, Google, Twitter, the Internet generally — and how much more even provincial US journalism participates increasingly in a global conversation. For all the dangers the digital world poses, the new possibilities it has opened up are huge.

References

- DAYAN, Daniel; KATZ, Elihu. **Media events: the live broadcasting of history**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- FINK, Katherine; SCHUDSON, Michael. The rise of contextual journalism, 1950s–2000s. **Journalism**, v. 15, n. 1, p. 3–20, jan. 2014. DOI: 10.1177/1464884913479015.
- HALLIN, Daniel C.; MANCINI, Paolo. **Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

RAETZSCH, Christoph. Journalism studies beyond journalism: a critical and appreciative dialogue with Michael Schudson. **Journalism Studies**, v. 18, n. 10, 1277–1292, jun. 2017. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2017.1338151

SCHUDSON, Michael. *Discovering the news: a social history of American newspapers*. New York: Basic Books, 1978. [Descobrindo a notícia: uma história social dos jornais nos Estados Unidos. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2010].

SCHUDSON, Michael. Second thoughts: Schudson on Schudson. **Journalism Studies**, v. 18, n. 10, 1334–1342, jul. 2017. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2017.1343931

SCHUDSON, Michael. **The good citizen**: a history of American civic life. New York: Martin Kessler Books, 1998.

SCHUDSON, Michael. **The rise of the right to know**: politics and the culture of transparency, 1945–1975. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2015.

SCHUDSON, Michael. The sociology of news production. **Media, Culture & Society**, v. 11, n. 3, p. 263–82, jul. 1989. DOI: 10.1177/016344389011003002

SCHUDSON, Michael. **Why democracies need an unlovable press**. Malden: Polity, 2008.

SIEBERT, Fred S.; PETERSON, Theodore; SCHRAMM, Wilbur. **Four theories of the press**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963.

WAHL-JORGENSEN, Karin. **Emotions, media and politics**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

About the author

Otávio Daros

Post-Doctorate Researcher and Professor Collaborator of the Social Communication Program of the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul. The most recent book is “*Writing Journalism History: The Press and Academia in Brazil*” (Routledge, New York).

Received on: 10/12/2023
Approved on: 06/25/2024

Responsible editors:
Marialva Barbosa and Sonia Virgínia Moreira



This article is published in Open Access under the **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY)**. The authors retain all copyrights, transferring to Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação the right to carry out the original publication and keep it updated.