Producing Facts in a World of Alternatives: Why Journalism Matters and Why It Could Matter More

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In a time of shrinking newsrooms, newspaper closings, fake news, alternative facts and outrage, and incursion from outsiders, why does professional journalism matter anymore? How can journalists, looking to defend their profession and the news they produce, claim authority over truth and fact? Michael Schudson engages these questions in *Why Journalism Still Matters*, a collection of writings on the value of today’s journalism for today’s democracy. *Why Journalism Still Matters* consists of 11 chapters split into four parts: “Where Journalism Came From,” “Going Deeper into Contemporary Journalism,” “Short Takes on Journalism and Democracy,” and an Afterword. Most of the chapters are shortened versions of previous published work or presentations from the past decade, all speaking toward the relevance of professional journalism for democracy today.

Part I, “Where Journalism Came From,” addresses the history of journalism as a profession and news as a particular narrative. Schudson locates these in the Enlightenment and the creation of a public sphere. It was these conditions that provided the physical space and the collective, relational thinking that let journalism and news as we know them today take root. Journalism practices, values, ideologies, and oversight have changed considerably over the past few hundred years, but especially over the twentieth century (the topic of Chapter 2). Where once journalists deferred to those in power, today they are more critical. Where once professional journalists shunned those with higher education, now journalism schools train aspiring journalists in enterprising practices. Where once public relations and news management agencies “peddled soft-core propaganda to promote special interests” (p. 39), now a “system of intelligence” involving concerned citizens helps point out omissions and errors.

Schudson notes that some of the changes to professional journalism involved developing a shared system of values and practices, with objectivity becoming one of the most important. Objectivity as a professional value originated around 1923 with the formation of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and their code of ethics. With this, journalism began to see itself as independent from the state and market, leading to many of the changes noted in Chapter Two. Schudson titles this early period of professionalization Objectivity 1.0, and it is characterized as the “he said/she said” period of journalism. It lasted until the 1950s and 1960s, when social upheaval and growing mistrust in politicians cultivated a more probing, aggressive, and analytical journalism. This was the beginning of Objectivity 2.0, where context and story became central to professional journalism. Instead of “just the facts,” context was necessary to understand the story. Is there an Objectivity 3.0? What might it look like? Schudson sees an era of Objectivity 3.0 on the horizon, one where, much as sociologists “take the role of other,” journalists might “place themselves in the position of those people they write about” (p. 66), providing further depth and perspective to the story. Doing so in the pursuit of truth, he argues, is a necessary democratic service of journalism. I’d add that Objectivity 3.0 might also include more oversight from external fact-checkers, a topic Schudson addresses in Chapter Two.

Part II, “Going Deeper into Contemporary Journalism,” delves into debates, questions, and states of present-day professional
journalism. Applying Raymond Williams’s notion of a “dramatized” society—where drama is no longer located solely in the theater and is no longer dictated by time and season but is instead every day, everywhere—Schudson argues that we now live in a “journalized society.” With the digital revolution, journalistic forms are more varied (e.g., blogs) and integrated into everyday life, and the distinctions between spectators and professionals are dissolving (e.g., pro-am journalism and “producers”). Complex social life is increasingly represented through journalism, and these representations are acted upon in local, familiar, and everyday life. Williams argued that drama and society are mutually and inevitably related. Schudson argues that the “true stories” of journalism play an important role in representing ourselves to ourselves in a complex society, signifying how journalism operates in the journalized society that characterizes contemporary social life.

Part of telling “true stories” involves establishing facts and trust. In what I feel is the most important contribution in Why Journalism Still Matters, Schudson builds an argument for establishing trust and factual truths with professional journalism. He draws on Hannah Arendt’s 1967 argument that power threatens truth, especially “factual truth,” those claims that involve greater degrees of interpretation, but that factual truth nonetheless exists. Using science as his key example, Schudson illustrates how facts and interpretation are collectively constructed, believed, and trusted, making them true. Power can change factual truth, but it takes a lot of power (and social distance and time, I might add) to change strongly held truths. Threats to truth include the four Ps and one S: propaganda, profit, prejudice, pranks, and skepticism. Professional journalism in its contemporary form is one of the more effective institutions for addressing these threats and thus for producing the factual truths on which democracy depends. If journalists are accurate, think against their assumptions, and follow the story wherever it goes, they can produce factual truths.

But do the economic challenges to professional journalism that have closed newsrooms and laid off countless professional journalists pose significant threats to producing factual truths, and therefore to democracy and our future? Not necessarily, argues Schudson. The journalism of today is no worse off than the journalism of yesterday, and in many ways it is much better off. Although newspapers have closed and the field of professionally employed reporters has shrunk, digital media have made it much easier to find, collect, and analyze data that would have taken months or years to process before, and it is much easier to share news more quickly and widely. Journalists may now cooperate across news organizations and national boundaries in producing content, as they did with the Panama Papers. There is indeed, Schudson argues, a happy tune to be whistled despite the unhappy ones of downsizing and changes in job practices brought about by a reduced labor force, a focus on clicks, hamsterism, and other disconcerting changes to the industry. In fact, arguing against those who see a completely independent press as the ideal goal, Schudson warns of the potential pitfalls that might come with such independence, suggesting that an independent press is also one easily subject to insularity, echo-chamber perspectives, and stagnant practices that fail to keep up with changes in democracy and our social institutions.

Schudson moves his focus squarely onto democracy in Part III, using Chapter Eight to discuss changing notions and practices of citizenship and democracy. He identifies four particular eras and uses The Simpsons to characterize each. Marge Simpson (1789–1820) represents the deferential citizen in an elite-dominated democracy. Homer Simpson (1820–1890) represents the loyal party citizen of party-dominated democracy. Lisa Simpson (1890–1920) is the informed citizen of the party-wary democracy. Bart Simpson (1950 to today) reflects the irreverent, rights-claiming citizen in trans-electoral democracy. Finally, Maggie Simpson represents the future, which Schudson uses to pose several questions on how this might look in an age of widespread digital media. Monitory democracy, counter-democracy, maybe something else? Schudson is optimistic, though it is hard to see a future absent some form of managed citizenship (Howard
2006), with our democratic ideas, practices, and values following a predetermined path.

The focus on citizenship and democracy in this section allows Schudson to entertain a different set of questions about journalism and politics than scholars typically ask. Instead of focusing on content and its political meanings, Schudson illustrates how journalism and journalists engage more directly with democratic institutions. Examples include when journalists work with government officials to elicit feedback about publishing reports. Sometimes they withhold reports for fear that releasing them would jeopardize U.S. lives or important democratic rituals and performances. Other times they publish them, knowing that doing so may have significant impacts on democratic practices and figures.

Journalists have also played important roles in creating new policies and in heading important federal agencies. Walter Lippmann helped craft the Lend-Lease program prior to U.S. involvement in World War II, and journalists were important figures in heading federal agencies and in applying pressure to create the Freedom of Information Act. Schudson notes that democracy is a matter of the public being oriented to government, but also orienting government to the public (p. 160). Journalists have played important roles in both. Schudson concludes Part III arguing that democracy is necessarily slow. Political socialization, elections, deliberation, and reasoning all take time. Schudson takes no position on this, saying it may be good or bad, or good and bad. Whatever it is, he claims it is necessary.

In the book’s afterword, Schudson engages some of the criticisms levied toward his previously published book Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press (Polity Press) and discussed in a special issue of Journalism Studies dedicated to an assessment of his work (2017, vol. 18[10]). These critiques include his relative neglect of technology and economics, the question of whether his earlier work can be seen as a sociology of knowledge, the usefulness of political history in journalism studies, and his optimism about the potential of journalism in democracy. Schudson notes that his socialization into academia came at a time when everything focused on the economy and ignored other forces. His work might disregard the economy and technology to some degree, but that is because it emphasizes the political and cultural instead. He notes that if it weren’t for business, there would be little journalism or news as we know it. In response to claims that he underestimates technology, his position might best be summed up by Barbie Zelizer’s (2019:343) recent statement: “it is journalism that gives technology purpose, shape, perspective, meaning and significance, not the other way around.” Schudson does agree that many of his writings can be seen as sociologies of knowledge. Political history, he argues, is important for understanding journalism sociologically today, as well as understanding citizenship. And finally, yes, he is optimistic.

With Why Journalism Still Matters, Schudson argues for the continuing value and importance of contemporary professional journalism for contemporary democracy as it is practiced in the United States. In many ways his argument is compelling, and the future looks promising, especially when considered alongside journalism’s history. Journalists have more tools at their disposal than ever before, they cooperate with others across great distances to produce dynamic investigative reporting, and they’re now subject to greater fact-checking and evaluation by outsiders, all while working hard to abide by core ideals on the role of journalism in democracy. All told, this is an interesting and useful book, especially for journalists looking for a way to justify their craft and claims of truth in light of alternative facts and fake news.

Yet the focus strictly on professional journalism and democratic institutions limits the book’s significance. Ultimately, the argument is about why journalism matters for the status quo. But doesn’t it matter for much more? There’s a growing recognition that prevailing notions of democracy and studies of journalism are too constraining: “we need to go beyond age-old concepts (such as news values and news cultures, democracy and democratic functions, truth and objectivity), traditional objects of study (employed journalists working in news-rooms), and output of legacy news media (predominantly focusing on written text)”
I agree. Journalism could matter much more if journalists had strong sociological imaginations and could situate stories in the social systems that produce them. Perhaps this could be Objectivity 3.0? A truly bold position, and a much more useful one, would address not only why journalism still matters, but also why it could and, I’d argue, should matter, for not only formal democracy, but for all the places where decisions are made and power is wielded.

Schudson’s book comes at a time when research on news and journalism has been developing at lightning speed. With the growth and diffusion of digital communication technologies (DCTs) over the past decade and a half new questions about innovation, cooperation and control, boundaries, text, consumption and uses, and networks are all being reexamined or examined anew. Sociologists are part of this wave, but they could be doing much more. Fortunately, after decades of disinterest, the study of news and media is undergoing somewhat of a sociological rebirth. Indeed, for the past several years, Casey Brienza, Ian Sheinheit, and colleagues have organized a media sociology pre-conference before the annual ASA meetings.

We might consider three areas of scholarship where sociologists directly engage questions about news and journalism. One involves the production of news and is rooted in the classic news ethnographies of the 1970s, renewed in light of the digital revolution. These include studies within news organizations (e.g., Usher 2014) and professional journalism in the field. Much of this work seeks to understand how practitioners adopt digital technologies and adjust to growing citizen encroachment on their profession. A second strand is riding the current wave of interest in field theory. This includes studies of the journalistic field and of how news creation is pulled by different poles within the field. Innovative studies examine news creation across cultural contexts (Benson 2013) and between professionals and amateurs (Lindner and Larson 2017). This is insightful work, but there is still much to explore, and sociologists are in a position to do so. For example, we could know more about the tensions that occur inside newsrooms, especially between managers and journalists (Lewis 2012), or how citizen news is responding to changes in news ecologies. What happens to the professionals who lose their jobs? What do they do next, and does it matter for local news scholarship?

A second area examines the discourses and codes associated with journalism and news and is largely influenced by cultural sociology. Most of this work is on content, but some also examines how journalists narrate and justify their work, especially in light of digital news-making and claims of fake news (Jacobs 2017). This work is insightful for thinking about the continuing stories journalists collectively tell and how they justify and rationalize their work in prosocial ways. We could know more about how people use news as a cultural object. How is news implicated in everyday life, as well as in voting and policy construction—not only in formal democracy, but at school board meetings, boy and girl scouting, neighborhood associations, barbershops, banking, and the many other areas of public life? These are areas for sociological contributions. They are important for understanding how people build and maintain trust and truth, ongoing constructions of stigma and othering, for collective organizing and social movements, and the varied, ongoing process of social inclusion and exclusion.

Finally, there are a growing number of network studies concerned with digital connectivity, reciprocity, and news-sharing and the creation of social ties and ongoing social relations (e.g., Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). Very little of this work is interpretive, drawing on users’ perspectives, or longitudinal, noting the processes of developing digitally mediated ties and relationships. Sociologists could examine in more detail how and why people build social networks, locally and more widely, both intentionally and unintentionally, with news as an important tool in these processes. Insights could be helpful for understanding how people build and build upon trusted relationships, how we use different platforms for different purposes, how we organize and collaborate through news networks, and how these relate to changes in civil and political societies.
Sociologists in the United States should heed recent calls for creativity in studying journalism (Witschge et al. 2019). We’re in a strong position to examine and theorize beyond the conventional approaches of news production, content, and audiences, to think beyond employed journalists working in newsrooms, and to consider impacts beyond those limited by the terms of formal democracy. Practice theory may provide one avenue for such scholarship (Bräuchler and Postill 2010). Sociologists are in a prime position to examine the countless ways we think and act “in relation” to media.

For those of us who are more interested in historical and comparative sociology, we might consider exploring such phenomena as “mediatization” and how long-term, subtle changes of media and communication inform broad changes in culture and society (Couldry and Hepp 2016). Emergent citizen news remains an understudied area, one that could provide insight for understanding community engagement with local political and social institutions and for understanding bigger sociological questions about agency and motivated action, reciprocity, and improvisation in times of neglect and need (e.g., disaster, war, etc.). There is great potential for a thriving sociology of news, not only for what we might learn about news creation, text, and uses, but for more enduring sociological questions of agency, cooperation, organizing, and othering. Given the symbolic power of media to represent and inform social life in all its forms, other fields within sociology, especially any field concerned with inequalities and social hegemonies, should be actively engaged in news and media sociology.

References


