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Broersma, Marcel

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Marcel Broersma

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INTRODUCTION

THE UNLOVABLE PRESS

Conversations with Michael Schudson

Marcel Broersma 

The saving grace of journalism. This is what Michael Schudson called objectivity in a video portrait shown during the ceremony in which he was awarded an honorary degree at the University of Groningen in 2014.¹ The university honoured Schudson on the occasion of its 400th anniversary, recognizing him for his ground-breaking scholarship in the study of journalism. His work on professional norms, routines and conventions, and their effect on how journalism functions within a democracy, has made a valued impact—not only in helping establish journalism studies as a distinct field of study, but also in making it resonate across the social sciences and humanities. Ever since the publication of *Discovering the News* (Schudson 1978), in which he scrutinized the rise of the objectivity paradigm, Schudson has been a key voice in this burgeoning area of research. Remember that in the late 1970s there still was a big gap between journalism education and academic scholarship. While the first was mainly geared towards teaching a trade, the latter typically treated journalism as not worthy of its attention. This changed quickly. While journalism and media were first studied by “the odd ones out” in their respective disciplines, they now very much moved to the mainstream. In Schudson’s opinion there might even be too much focus on journalism as a specific object of study. While news and journalism, and their professional development in the twentieth century, offer a red thread throughout his work, he has been careful not to study them in isolation. He always wonders what makes them meaningful—or not, loveable—or not, in the broader context of society and democracy.

The point Schudson made about “that somewhat unrealistic notion of objectivity” in the 2014 video, was that it had a very important function for journalism: “some of the things media critics complain about the most, are actually the saving grace of journalism”. Recently, he returned to this argument in an essay in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Schudson 2017) that discussed “what non-fake news looks like”. Shortly after the 2016 US elections—and still ongoing at the point of writing the introduction to this special issue—public discourse is full of worries about alternative facts, fake news and the so-called post-truth society. News organizations are accused of framing reality, hiding the truth behind ideological bias and simply offering blatant lies to the public. In his piece reflecting on this state of affairs, Schudson pauses. Journalists make the news and frame reality, but this does not necessarily mean that they make things up. They have expert knowledge and professional expertise and comply with quality indicators that are embedded in the objectivity regime. Despite all of its shortcomings, we still need an unlovable press, Schudson argues, because journalism is “the enemy of pride and pomposity and ignorance, and thereby a good friend of the American people.”

This intervention in public debate is telling for Schudson’s scholarship. As academics are often faced with sweeping questions, Schudson reveals the value of bringing nuance back in and showing that things might be more complicated than is generally assumed.

His work is always written in an accessible style that reflects lucid thinking and almost naturalizes the depth of his arguments, and his scholarship is always geared towards revealing complexity:

It challenges commonly held truths and laments of decline by historicizing and contextualizing them. Have things never been as bad in journalism? The number of journalists is still higher than 40 years ago, and news more complete and less biased.

It focuses on how journalism has developed routines to construct a reliable representation of reality. Facts are only relative? Yet we continue to turn to professional news gatherers with expert knowledge we need and trust. And, by the way, there's more investigative journalism than ever before.

It relates news to its function in democracy. Does journalism rely too much on covering events? Maybe. But the coverage of the unexpected, "stuff that happens", often opens up the opportunity to report on underlying processes that define the course of society (cf. Schudson 2005).

It is tempting to continue the exercise. But let's hold still—and get back to the video. Holding up the *New York Times* in a small park next to Columbia School of Journalism, Schudson calls this stack of paper an "impressive intellectual achievement that does many things at once". While running the risk of being too laudative, a similar argument can be made for Schudson's work. Due to its richness and broadness, Schudson's work appeals to journalism scholars, historians, sociologists, political scientists and a range of other academic species. While mainly theoretical and essayistic in character, it is grounded in historical context, everyday reality and institutionalized impact. The scenery on the first pages of *The Good Citizen* (Schudson 1998), which Schudson himself considers his best book, provides a good example. On the first page we find the author in a garage in San Diego, monitoring an election-day precinct. Many of the voters don't show up and the rituals election officials have to perform seem meaningless. But are they? What follows is an exploration of what we can actually expect from citizens, and democracy at large, and how this evolved over time. By means of conclusion, the concept of "monitorial citizenship" is introduced to coin the democratic value of citizens who are not always on, but participate when necessary. This idea is now widely picked up in research on political participation in a digital world.

Schudson's *oeuvre* feels somewhat like a packed warehouse where there is something there for everyone. It is primarily focused on US journalism and breathes a clear American-based conceptual framework for thinking about professional journalism, journalism ethics, democratic theory and the economic foundations of journalism. Although this makes it very context-specific, it does offer an inspiring contrast for thinking about journalism in other parts of the world. Similarly, Schudson's clear faith in institutional structures and experts to safeguard democratic processes—for instance, his most recent book *The Rise of the Right to Know* (Schudson 2015) explores the messy processes in which citizens' right to information was arranged in law making—provides a counterpoint for those who believe that participatory culture adds to journalism, and that deliberation and conversation are the soul of democracy (Schudson 1997). Whether you agree with him or not, Schudson is "good to think with", as Rodney Benson states in his contribution to this special issue.

This collection of essays results from a conference organized in Groningen to coincide with Schudson receiving his honorary doctorate. Scholars were invited to get into

conversation with Schudson's work, either by critically reflecting upon it, applying it to their own or using it to evaluate recurring debates in journalism studies. The response to the call for papers was massive. A full two-day conference with 44 papers and three keynotes that all relate to one person's work seems overwhelming (when told, Schudson himself said thinly: "I think I can sit through that ..."), but it actually opened up conversations between scholars working in different fields and with Schudson himself responding to the papers. They were structured along three themes present in Schudson's work: the sociology of news, media history and democratic theory—which offer red threads to this issue too.

The selected conference contributions printed in this special issue critically discuss elements of Schudson's work and assess their relevance for future research. Rodney Benson discusses the role of commercialism in Schudson's work and how this relates to his theoretical and political positions. Silvio Waisbord focuses on his contributions to political communication research, while Lucas Graves takes this further by assessing the analytical and normative framework Schudson developed for understanding contemporary democracy. A plea for modesty in our normative expectations of journalism is made by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, who argues that simply providing information suffices for journalism's role in democracy. Then Martin Conboy moves the discussion into the historical realm by showing how Schudson prompted journalism historians to conduct interdisciplinary investigation that goes beyond myopic and chronological research. Christoph Raetzsch picks up on this argument by showing how Schudson's historical studies deal with technology and culture, and makes a plea for further research on how journalism constructs publics. But just how can stories construct knowledge and publics? Erik Neveu tackles this question in a piece that discusses Schudson's distinction between a story and an information model in journalism. Chris W. Anderson goes a step further by arguing that Schudson is first and foremost a sociologist of knowledge, showing how his work helps to understand the current changes in journalism. The concept of objectivity should be re-evaluated in an era of factuality, argues Brian McNair, who takes Schudson's work in the historical sociology of journalism as a bench mark. Finally, Michael Schudson himself responds to the articles in an afterword that pairs an "optimism of spirit" with a "realism of assessment".

After all, being unlovable might, paradoxically, be the saving grace of journalism.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTE

1. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0sA1BxmW0g>.

ORCID

Marcel Broersma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7342-3472>

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Marcel Broersma, Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: m.j.broersma@rug.nl