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WHY DEMOCRACIES NEED AN UNLOVABLE PRESS



MICHAEL SCHUDSON

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For Margie

Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press

Michael Schudson

polity

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1

Introduction: facts and democracy

In the late 1960s, political philosopher Hannah Arendt observed that truth and politics “are on rather bad terms with each other.” She saw that power threatened truth, particularly “factual truth.” Formal truths like “two plus two equals four” are not as vulnerable as factual truth because “facts and events – the invariable outcome of men living and acting together – constitute the very text of the political realm.”¹ Not incidentally, they also constitute the text of journalism.

Arendt wrote in defense of facts, but this was not easy. Even in the 1960s, the concept of a fact was under indictment. “Do facts,” Arendt asked,

independent of opinion and interpretation, exist at all? Have not generations of historians and philosophers of history demonstrated the impossibility of ascertaining facts without interpretation, since they must first be picked out of a chaos of sheer happenings (and the principles of choice are surely not factual data) and then be fitted into a story that can be told only in a certain perspective, which has nothing to do with the original occurrence?

Arendt concedes all this but then boldly asserts that these perplexities “are no argument against the existence of factual matter, nor can they serve as a justification for blurring the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and

interpretation, or as an excuse for the historian to manipulate facts as he pleases.”²

Arendt tells a story of Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France during World War I, who, a few years after the war, was discussing the question of who was responsible for initiating the horrendous bloodshed of that conflict. Clemenceau was asked what future historians would say. He replied, “This I don’t know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.” Arendt then adds that this is not just up to the historians, that it would take “a power monopoly over the entire civilized world” to erase the fact that, on August 4, 1914, German troops crossed into Belgium rather than Belgian troops crossing into Germany. And then – ever a realist – she adds that “such a power monopoly is far from being inconceivable, and it is not difficult to imagine what the fate of factual truth would be if power interests, national or social, had the last say in these matters.”³

Is there any way out of this battle between politics and truth? For Arendt, it depends on how politics operates in a particular instance. Some political systems tolerate or even encourage the establishment of institutions that stand at arm’s length from power. She cites the judiciary and the academy as two domains where “at least in constitutionally ruled countries, the political realm has recognized, even in the event of conflict, that it has a stake in the existence of men and institutions over which it has no power.”⁴ This is a point of fundamental importance. It is a messy point, to be sure. The judiciary can be corrupted by power. Universities, although they have often been havens of critical and independent thought, are also eager to serve power. But we do not live in a perfect world, nor will we. And the effort to invent and institutionalize truth-telling and independent judgment may be as good as we get.

To the judiciary and the academy, I would add “experts” generally and independent journalism specifically. A broad picture of how the party of factuality can be advanced is suggested in my concluding chapter concerning expert knowledge in a democracy, but the subtleties are worked out in the chapters on news. These chapters – all of them – suggest the dangers of simplification. Is news melodramatic? Sometimes it is. But is it normally melodramatic, as some critics say? Not at all, or so I argue in chapter 8, “The anarchy of events and the anxiety of story telling.” Is news too focused on the immediate, the breaking story, the contingent? And does it offer too little analysis and interpretation? Perhaps. But contingencies – a massacre at My Lai in 1968, a break-in at the Watergate Democratic National Committee headquarters in 1972, a release of radiation at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in 1979, sadistic torture at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 – may do more to alter thinking than even the best analysis and interpretation. Facts, events, contingencies humble our ideologies and theories and frameworks – at least they do if we have not blocked out the empirical world with dark glasses. (See chapter 5.)

Journalism is not a perfect vessel of truth. Its coverage of politics is based on unspoken, often unconscious, and sometimes unjustified assumptions (see chapter 6). Its narratives are based not only on a familiarity with the communities it covers but on an alienation from them (see chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7). Journalists are torn between understanding the world from the viewpoint of the sources they talk to – at the risk of being manipulated – and suspecting that their sources are lying or spinning – at the risk of cynicism. US journalism’s obsession with facts and events often substitutes for a broader perspective and a historically or conceptually richer canvas. The distinctive

strengths of American-style journalism (see chapter 3) are also weaknesses.

My late colleague, sociologist Bennett Berger, remarked to me years ago that the conclusion of most of my work is always the same: “Things are more complicated than you thought.” I always wanted to prove Bennett wrong about this, but I have to acknowledge that he was onto something. This is not so terrible a confession; after all, about the only thing we can be sure of, regarding theories of the human condition, is that they are wrong. *All* of them are wrong, except those too empty or tautological to actually stand as theories at all. The good theories – those that actually provide some sort of non-tautological framework for seeing the world – are routinely upended by events (the special pleasure of journalism) or by variations across time (the revenge of historians) or across cultures (the revenge of anthropology) or by variations among individuals (the revenge of what statisticians call the “normal distribution”).

Still, it is not enough to argue that journalism, public life, and public knowledge are complex. It is part of the scholar’s job to blaze a useable trail through complexity. This requires having some idea about where you want the trail to take you. My goal is to understand journalism’s special place in democracies, especially how to think through its mission once we stop equating democracy with maximum feasible participation or direct popular rule. Scholars, journalists, and citizens alike should learn to recognize the ways that institutions can help as well as hinder democratic government. We should learn to take seriously the benefits of representative democracy. We should learn that specialized knowledge (in experts) and concentrated power (in politicians or judges) are necessary ingredients in democracy and that the democratic task is to control the specialists rather than eliminate specialized knowledge. If

we can learn all of this, we will be on a path to better understanding journalism's possibilities for democracy.

To affirm that there is something we can reliably refer to as a fact and to acknowledge that journalists are often the first to inform most of us about them is not to suppose that arriving at facts is easy. I hold only that seeking the truth is an inevitable choice for anyone dedicated to the values of a liberal society, that is, a society that refuses to rest complacently in a faith in anything except human fallibility. We are reminded of human fallibility over and over again since we can see in history scenes of the wreckage of lives destroyed by human folly and pride. In the face of this, no human institution seems worth our fidelity if it does not provide for its own monitoring, criticism, and revision. Institutions that do this seriously deserve our support; those who seek to weaken, marginalize, or destroy such institutions and who make decisions of fateful consequence on the basis of gut instinct and broad distrust of the accumulated knowledge of expert communities and popular judgment alike deserve our criticism - and should be voted out of power.

This is not to say experts are always right (even when they agree). It is certainly not to succumb to fantasies about how people are good at heart or about the wisdom of crowds or majorities - the Nuremberg rallies, the Roman coliseum, the popular lynchings in the American South? It is to say that people should approach the world as if leadership, thinking, deliberative effort, imagination, and recognition of facts can sometimes advance the cause of humanity.

In 1920 Walter Lippmann looked with distress upon the American journalism he was a part of. He believed journalism was incapable of reforming itself, that it did not have the intellectual resources to present an accurate picture of the world. If it succeeded - and he still hoped it might - it would be only because entities outside journalism

- in government, in the universities, and in private organizations dedicated to investigation, analysis, and study, all of which he called “political observatories” - would come to provide predigested materials for reporters to relay to the public.⁵ Lippmann did not believe the public would do very much with these materials - people could not absorb it all even if they wanted to, and for the most part people were just not sufficiently interested in the world beyond their doorstep to even bother. But, either from the political observatories directly or through reports of them in the news, government would come to operate with a more realistic vision of the world.

The problems of journalism today are of a different order. We see the deterioration of the economic structure that has sustained news gathering since the late nineteenth century. We see the erosion or demise of substantial local news organizations. The floundering of metropolitan daily newspapers is dire, but the picture is not all gloomy. First, the maturing of a more professional, detached, and analytical media since the 1960s has been impressive. Second, since the 1990s, there has been a vast, stunning multiplication on the Internet of the voices of civil society and exponents of media accountability. The rise of a global civil society, linked to the globalization of journalism itself, is powerful and transformative. There are many new journalistic voices (notably, bloggers) and new journalistic forms and forums (blogs, news aggregators, wikis, e-government sources). Meanwhile, conventional media that were once distributed locally have a new online presence that makes them nationally and globally available to hundreds of millions. In my judgment, historical studies of the press offer no grounds for nostalgia for the ghost of journalism past - nineteenth-century American newspapers were bitterly and wildly partisan in the cities, while the country papers were generally bland. Twentieth-century US

journalism up to the late 1960s was less critical, less investigative, and more deferential to government office-holders than it is today, and significantly more narrow in its outlook (notably concerning women, minorities, gays and lesbians, and most topics a few steps away from government, politics, and the economy). The news was rarely enterprising in exploring topics not already on the agenda of leading law-makers.

No one can speak with much assurance about where journalism will move in the next quarter of a century or even the next ten years or the next five. Who, five years ago, would have predicted what a powerhouse Google has become? Who, five years ago, anticipated YouTube? Who imagined five years ago that bloggers would have gained such influence on the mainstream media? Or that Craigslist, that dates only to 1995 and was still just a blip on the national screen in 2001, would be the agent responsible for removing classified advertising as a mainstay of newspaper profitability? Or that Wikipedia would be so indispensable? Or that text in this visual and digital age, far from disappearing, would become a verb?

The chapters collected here take up diverse topics related to the news media and public life, but several themes stretch across them. Perhaps most important and most unusual in the literature about journalism is the theme that democracy in modern societies is representative democracy, and representative democracy has distinct virtues often obscured in a reflexive American populism. There is an old quip, "I would rather be governed by the first hundred people listed in the Boston phone book than by the Harvard faculty." Anyone who has sat through faculty meetings understands this sentiment, but neither alternative offered in the joke provides an adequate version of democracy. I do not want to be governed by the first 100 citizens of Boston or the first 100 faculty members at

Harvard. I would rather be governed by the ten people selected in competitive elections by either the first 100 people in the Boston phone book or the first 100 members of the Harvard faculty. Representative democracy is not a “second best” solution we reluctantly resort to when the country’s population grows too large. Representation creates a better system of governance – more honest, fair, and trustworthy – than direct democracy.

James Madison, father of the American Constitution, held this view. Like many of the Founders, Madison feared the direct influence of the people – that is, he feared the direct influence of property-owning white males who were not among the thoughtful, educated elite of their communities. His anxiety about popular democracy was not based on distrust of blacks, women, or the poor – these groups were simply not part of his calculations at all. But he believed the ordinary property-owning white male was provincial and ignorant, likely to be emotional and hot-headed, and unlikely to know what would suit the good of people from other communities and other walks of life.

In our own day, political theorist George Kateb has argued that representative democracy is superior in principle to direct or participatory democracy or, in Kateb’s terms, Rousseauist government. In representative democracy, political authority is granted to those who wield it only temporarily (until the next election). Since it is granted temporarily, it becomes necessarily a chastened political authority. The public derives from this a sense of skepticism about authority and a sense of independence in relation to the powerful. In a Rousseauist world where decisions are made by the people at large, dissent (at least once a decision is made) becomes psychologically and socially difficult. In a representative democracy, compared to other political systems, dissent is relatively easy and, to a degree encouraged. Political authority is not only temporary but

partial, because the representatives are leaders of a party in a system of two or more parties. This intensifies skepticism about power - "the very association of authority and partisanship promotes a sense of moral indeterminacy."⁶ Kateb sums up his judgment as follows: "The main point here is that the existence of an electoral system ... supplies a vivid, public, and continuous imparting of the moral lesson that the only tolerable authority is a deliberately chastened authority and that every effort must be made to have authority offend against moral equality as little as possible."⁷

Kateb makes a remarkable case. Of course, representative democracies do not in the short run avoid the temptations of unchastened power and it is entirely possible for elected governments to quash dissent, weaken the powers of opposition parties and intimidate putatively independent media, judges, universities, and experts. Still, over time, such efforts to consolidate rule in violation of democratic values typically come undone.

What would happen if journalists and journalism schools and journalistic self-understanding in general began to take representative democracy seriously and recognize in it the grounds for a revised model of journalism's place in democracy? The prevailing understanding of the function of the media in a democracy is that the people rule - more or less directly (and if they don't, they should) - and that they will rule more adequately if they are well informed by the press about public affairs. Journalism falls short of doing this job well because: (a) the government keeps information from the press or successfully manipulates the press into accepting its spin; (b) the corporate profit-oriented entities that gather most news are guided more by the economic advantages of sensation, sleaze, and the superficial than by efforts to inform the public; and (c) the professional journalists who work inside these corporate beasts and try

to extract bits of truth from devious politicians are occupationally cautious, hobbled by in-group values of media elites, and motivated by professional advancement or driven by their own political views rather than by a passion to make democracy work.

This summarizes, I think, the lay understanding of how the press operates in the United States. Making some allowances for the greater role of public service broadcasting in much of western Europe, and for a stronger tradition of party-affiliated newspapers there, it is a rough approximation of European understandings, too. Although it is based on premises about democracy I do not accept, it may even have been a relatively adequate understanding of the news media half a century ago, but it seems a poor model now. This is so for several reasons. First, today there are many more organizations than just the conventional news media dedicated to informing citizens about public affairs in systematic and ongoing ways. Some of the most important of these new “news organizations” are bureaus and departments in the government itself. Second, new technologies have unleashed a plethora of new information-gathering and disseminating organizations – websites and other sources of authoritative information that have already had an impact, sometimes a shattering impact, on public affairs. Third, these same new technologies have helped to build an as-yet-unnamed quasi-public circulation of information that is altering the way people go about their lives. Think of the global impact of the digital photographs soldiers took of their own acts in abusing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. In 2004, these photos came to light because of an inquiry initiated inside the US military, the technical ease of transmitting digital photography instantaneously across the globe, old-fashioned investigative reporting, competition among US media outlets to break the story and outrage in the Arab world and elsewhere that forced

president George W. Bush to respond and thus validate the story as worthy of the front page.⁸ In short, the whole “information ecology” of political and social life today is in the midst of profound change. The place of the press in this wider informational orbit must be re-described. These chapters can help toward that re-description, not by characterizing this new information ecology but by offering a view of democracy and a realistic portrait of news organizations that are necessary to making sense of it.

Democracy is not about maximizing popular involvement in decision-making. It is about assuring a role for popular participation and for popular review of governmental performance within a system of competitive elections, due process, the protection of individual rights, the protection of freedoms of speech, press, petition, and association, and the preservation of a pluralistic culture. In this context, the press should be understood as multiform and multipurpose, a mixed-bag of an institution. There is nothing pure or refined about it. It is the same organization that sells consumers investigative reporting, the weather, recipes, and crossword puzzles in a single daily bundle. It is the same organization that may take great pains in one section to be even-handed and detached, say, in covering candidates for political office, and in another section cover the local sports team with partisan fervor and, when the team is winning, evident glee. And I am still talking about a single news product, not the differences among different news organizations that may conceive their tasks in quite different ways from one another.

Different features of news serve different democratic functions. The blogger does not usually gather news but criticizes those who do. The front-line reporter and the blogger can both be useful. The blogger obviously feeds on the reporter but we now have more than a few cases where mainstream news reports feed off of tips, ideas, and insights

initiated in the blogosphere. The investigative reporter is the star of a watchdog press, but that does not mean that the obituary writer at the same organization is not also serving democracy, telling us something about what life and death mean in our day. The obituaries honor and validate a community, a village, or a nation. They celebrate achievement and they may remind us that even the high and mighty have been lonely or sick or sad. The investigative reporter, the White House correspondent, the business reporter, the theater critic, the obit writer are all offering news that serves vital social - and democratic - functions.

Given this complexity - there is that word again - a lot of familiar talk of what the media are and how they operate, and how they serve or fail to serve democracy, is tendentious, simple-minded, or just mistaken. From journalists, too often talk about the media is self-congratulatory or defensive; from external critics, too often the talk is innocent of realities in the daily practices of journalism and too likely to pick and choose the examples that illustrate a pre-conceived thesis. It is a big world out there in our garrulous news media and there is scarcely any thesis without a set of examples to illustrate it! The task I have set myself is to try to know the world of journalism not as journalists know it, but with what journalists know about it in mind and how journalists experience their work and their world in view. I try to picture how a question looks from the perspective of the reporter in the field or the editor in the newsroom. I have never been either - but I have talked to both, I have occasionally observed both at work, and I have often heard them discuss the work they do at conferences or in print.

My outlook offers a kind of humility on behalf of, but also in contention with, academic inquiry. We learn from our own inadequacies at comprehensive analysis not to accept any