

學術對談

## 社會學視角下的傳媒研究： 新聞、民主及其未來

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(Prof. Michael Schudson)

「理論很美，卻不是真理。理論只是組織真理的一種方式。所謂的真理就是，要努力了解這個世界，繪出你的所見，釐清現實事物是如何運轉的。這很難，也很有趣，值得我用一輩子去探索。」

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## **Communication Study from a Sociological Perspective: Journalism, Democracy and its Future**

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### **Abstract**

In 2009, Michael Schudson published “The Reconstruction of American Journalism” with Leonard Downie Jr. on *Columbia Journalism Review*, with analysis and suggestions on the status quo of American Journalism, which had garnered worldwide attention and caused strong repercussions. In this interview, Schudson reviewed the investigation process, shares changes in the “new journalism ecosystem”, and reiterates the necessity of setting up the government funding for American newspapers. In addition, Schudson, who has created a social research path in journalism history, shares his intellectual experience in the study of media and democracy, looking back to the traditional division of Communication studies and forward to the future of journalism research. He calls for the researchers to face the limitations of theories, always keep refining our concepts in scholarly advancement.

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## 邁克爾·舒德森教授簡介

邁克爾·舒德森 (Michael Schudson)，當代美國深具影響力的媒介社會學者，哈佛大學社會學博士，1976至1980年曾於芝加哥大學任教，1980年至2009年執教於加州大學聖地牙哥分校，2005年起兼任加州大學聖地牙哥分校與哥倫比亞大學新聞學院教授，現任美國哥倫比亞大學新聞學院教授。

舒德森教授的主要研究方向為新聞學及其歷史、大眾文化與民主政治。他著述頗豐，迄今包括：*Discovering the News* (1978)、*The Power of News* (1995)、*The Good Citizen* (1998)、*The Sociology of News* (2003)、*Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (2008) 等九部專著。其中《發掘新聞》(*Discovering the News*) 為他的成名作，開創了美國新聞史研究的社會學流派，三十年來歷久不衰。包括近期出版的中文譯作《好公民》(*The Good Citizen*) 在內的五本譯作，在中國傳媒學界引起巨大迴響。

他多次獲得學術殊榮，曾當選古根海姆會士 (Guggenheim fellow)、帕羅奧圖行為科學高級研究中心 (Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto) 駐地研究員、麥克亞瑟天才學者 (MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellow)，並獲得穆雷·艾德曼傑出事業成就獎 (Murray Edelman distinguished career award)。2012年當選為美國藝術與科學院院士並獲荷蘭格羅寧根大學 (University of Groningen) 榮譽博士學位。

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編者註：2009年11–12月間，傳播學學者邁克爾·舒德森 (Michael Schudson) 與《華盛頓郵報》前執行編輯小倫納德·唐尼 (Leonard Downie Jr.) 聯合執筆，在《哥倫比亞新聞評論》上發表了題為「美國新聞業的重建」的長篇報告，針對全美報業所面臨的危機給出分析與建議，引起業界的巨大反響。邁克爾·舒德森是當代美國最為知名的新聞學者之一，現任美國哥倫比亞大學新聞學院教授。2014年5月，香港浸會大學傳理學院院長黃煜教授就該份備受關注的長篇報告及新聞與民主等相關問題採訪了舒德森教授。

HY: 黃煜

MS: 舒德森

**HY:** 過去二十年新聞媒體經歷了翻天覆地的變化。您在2009年與小倫納德·唐尼聯合發表題為「美國新聞業的重建」的報告，吸引了世界各國讀者關注。在這篇極具影響力的報告中，您談到了美國新聞業未來發展的可能途徑。這是一篇鼓舞人心的翹楚之作。時隔四年再回顧當時的報告，您有甚麼新的想法？在您看來，報告中有任何需要改進的地方嗎？

**MS:** 不久前我又重閱那份報告。儘管受到外界最多關注的是我們針對美國新聞業重建提出的一系列建議，但我認為更為重要的是我們的分析。就在2008年和2009年，人們突然意識到美國新聞業遭遇到了深度危機。

**HY:** 2008年爆發了金融海嘯。

**MS:** 是的。撇開整個經濟體系遭遇的危機不談，新聞業自身早已陷入困境，紙媒卻一直應對遲緩。雖然很多業界人士都對新媒體技術充滿期待，但新聞機構的盈利卻不斷縮水。Craigslist (美國最大的免費分類廣告網站)和其他一些線上廣告網站來勢洶洶，搶奪了報刊分類廣告的市場。這對大多數報紙而言都是一筆不小的損失(佔總收入的25%-35%)。報刊上的分類廣告幾乎在一夜之間消失，因為每個人都可以通過免費網路平台叫賣二手車或出租公寓。當時，哥大新聞學院也正邁入嶄新時期，不僅培養新聞記者，還在發展小規模博士項目、開展新聞學研究。我們開設了新的碩士項目，「新聞史」作為必修課程也應運而生。哥大新聞學院院長尼古拉斯·勒曼(Nicholas Lemann)鼓勵全院同仁參與這場波及整個新聞業的對話，「美國新聞業的重建」的報告也是由他提議撰寫的。

回顧起來，我個人最滿意的是這份報告「審慎樂觀」的定調。2009年夏，我們試圖在業界過度悲觀和過度樂觀的兩極之間找到折中點。當時，有的業界人士為美國新聞業的衰落扼腕嘆息，而有的人卻對新媒體技術抱有烏托邦式的幻想。我們認為，業界人

士有理由感到樂觀，但當看到自己的同事丟掉飯碗時也不免感到低落。我們的「審慎樂觀」，是對那些失去工作的業界人士抱有同情，卻不贊同所謂「美國新聞業是有史以來最偉大的造物」的觀點。早些時候，唐尼寫過一本書叫做《關於新聞的新聞》(*The News About the News*)，毫不留情地批評了美國的新聞業。書中提到，就算(地方)電視新聞明天就消失，國家也不會因此變糟。我們意見相合，都對美國新聞業有頗多批評。

我們提出的建議有兩種類型。一部分建議肯定了業界在某些方面取得的進展，認為應該予以保持。例如已經遍佈全國的非營利新聞機構。他們做得很好，而我們想對慈善公益人士說：「請支持對你們社區有貢獻的新聞機構。」另一方面，傳統新聞業遭受危機。許多媒體工作者正致力於尋找新的媒體發展模式並投入資金。這些改變已經悄然發生，無需我們再去發明創造甚麼。

**HY:** 目前這種現象仍在繼續。

**MS:** 是的，仍在繼續。許多高校也開始產製新聞，提供給大眾。這是一個絕妙的主意。新聞報導和腦部外科手術不同。即便是相對缺乏經驗的新手，只要有經驗豐富的導師提供指導，也能完成一篇相對好的作品。我們應該多做嘗試。這方面的探索仍在進行，並取得穩步進展。許多高校都做得有聲有色，包括哥大新聞學院。然而，我們最受關注的提議是倡導聯邦政府提供資金支持。新聞已經成為單靠私營機構很難支撐的一種公共產品，所以政府可以起到作用。事實上，許多記者讀完這篇報告後都評論道：「這報告不錯——除了這一條可怕、危險和荒謬的建議。」

**HY:** 您是指政府資助？

**MS:** 對，政府資助。

**HY:** 一些歐洲國家，特別是斯堪的納維亞國家都設有政府資助。

**MS:** 沒錯。譬如瑞典、挪威、丹麥、法國和奧地利，他們的新聞機構享有直接政府資助，卻沒有喪失獨立性，也不會變為政府機構。這說的是報業。至於電視廣播，國家補貼更是屢見不鮮。英國廣播公司(BBC)就是一個最具影響力的例子。上述提到的這些案例，都自有一套措施可以將新聞機構同撥款機構(譬如政府)隔離

開來。因此我們想不到任何理由不讓美國也去效法這些國家。何況我們已經有了公共廣播公司(PBS)和全國公共廣播電台(NPR)這樣的成功案例。政府投入不大，但在運營初期能夠起到實質性的幫助，那些都是真金白銀。以NPR為例，在政府資助的一路扶持下，NPR成為了一個近半個世紀以來美國偉大的新聞界成功典範。這個卓越的新聞機構，直到1970年才被創建起來。又例如，美國國家科學基金會、國家藝術基金會和國家人文基金會，對知識產業的各個領域都予以扶持。他們有一套辦法可以保護科學家、藝術家和教授，避免其工作受到撥款機構的影響。既然如此，試問為甚麼美國的新聞業不能這樣做？我們能夠這麼做，但恐怕行之不易，甚至難以實現。政府無法從中獲益，政客們也撈不到甚麼好處。所以我從未擔心過我們的提議是不是錯了，因為永遠不會有被驗證的機會。然而，對我們而言最重要的是，能夠把這樣一種方案擺上檯面。我們需要跳出固有思維模式去思考如何應對。儘管這一提議沒有達成任何實效，但它的價值在於擴大了公眾視野，觸發新的思考。

**HY:** 我想另外一個可能的原因是，2009年之後的新聞業並不像人們所預想的那樣糟，一些弱勢媒體也生存下來了。

**MS:** 是的。我想2014年人們可能還沒有意識到，只是相對少數的報紙宣告破產。這個比例是1950年代以來的最高點。數據顯示，現在每年約有20家報紙破產，而以往只有10家左右。就實際破產而言，這個數量相對較小。然而，新聞室的萎縮和服務的銳減卻是巨大的。最明顯的就是都市日報的裁員。《華盛頓郵報》、《巴爾的摩太陽報》、《波士頓環球報》、《邁阿密前鋒報》和《洛杉磯時報》相繼解僱了數百名記者，裁員人數佔員工總數的三分之一到一半。我在近期的談話中提過這樣一個問題：如果報社有很多錢可以聘回盡可能多的記者來打造高品質的媒體，那麼究竟需要請回多少人才夠？答案是，也許一半就夠了。因為報社記者比以往更加有效率，互聯網的出現帶來了改變，網絡資源極其豐富。

**HY:** 這就是您在報告中提出的「新新聞業生態系統」嗎？很多人對這個概念感興趣。這個概念有甚麼意涵？您能解釋一下嗎？

MS: 所謂「新聞生態」或「生態系統」不過是一種說辭。很多事物同時出現，並相互關聯。這些不同的元素可以相互合作，在同一環境下共同生存。沒人知道它們的走向，需要經過反覆試驗才行。回想幾年前，推特 (Twitter) 只是一個新生事物，現在卻成為美國記者必不可少的工具，在全世界範圍內亦是如此。

**HY:** 中國也有相似的平台。在中國，微信比 Facebook 更受歡迎，微博的功能和 Twitter 更為相近。懂得英文的使用者很有可能同時使用中、英文版本的多種社交媒體平台。各式各樣的選擇讓人們繁忙不已。

MS: 當我第一次聽說 Twitter 規定用戶只能發送 140 字的資訊時，我感到匪夷所思，而如今人們卻離不開它了。又有誰會預想說我們需要有一個像 YouTube 這樣的平台。如今我們還有了一個由用戶生成的線上百科全書。眾多用戶可以在閒暇時間向維基百科貢獻他們的知識專長，他們可以是某個小領域的專家。這實在是個絕妙的工具。與此同時，由於各類線上機構、新媒體公司的網站在運營初期往往無人問津，他們開始同《紐約時報》、地方公共廣播電台或地方報紙開展合作。這給新聞業的文化也帶來了很大改變。以前記者不會和競爭對手攜手合作，如今卻成為家常便飯，這也是新新聞生態的一部分。它的變化如此之快，以致於沒人知道如何去準確地描述它，但它的確至關重要。

**HY:** 您曾在您的著作《新聞的力量》(*The Power of News*) 中提到，新聞應是權力的掌控者，而不是權力的傳聲筒。最近，您提議向地方新聞提供政府資助。在您看來，新聞媒體究竟是民主進程中的動力還是障礙？之所以問您這個問題，是因為您最近有一部《好公民：美國公共生活史》已被譯成中文出版，在中國學術界引起了熱烈討論。美國經驗對中國來說就好比一面鏡子，儘管兩國社會環境有差異，但這並不妨礙中國的知識份子參與這類議題的討論和思考。

MS: 說到我關於民主的論作，尤其是《好公民：美國公共生活史》這本書，我的腦海裏一直會出現與尤爾根·哈貝馬斯 (Jürgen Habermas) 的對話，以及公共領域這個理論。我同意哈貝馬斯的觀點，自

由、民主的現代市民社會出現於十八世紀末、十九世紀的西歐與美國。美國獨立戰爭和法國大革命樹立了民主國家典範，鼓舞了全世界——不僅是在西方，還有西方之外。我們都深受啟蒙運動的影響，相信科學和探索的普適性，承繼了這場十八世紀思潮的思想精髓。哈貝馬斯認為，公共生活也從啟蒙運動開始發生了改變。但他顯然是將我們為之奮鬥的「公共領域」理想同當時倫敦、巴黎咖啡館裏的那種狀態混為一談。以美國為例，早期的公共領域和我們如今認同的模式相去甚遠。婦女缺席，只有白種男性參與其中，並且只是擁有財產的白種男性。很長一段時間之後——基本上跨越了整個十九世紀及二十世紀初期，公眾的範圍才得以擴大。因此我在書中問道：美國不同歷史時期的公民生活分別呈現出怎樣的形態？我的結論是：美國的民主經歷了不同時期，每一階段都有所不同，在這兩百年間不斷取得進步。雖然這種進步不總是那麼明朗，民主的意涵卻不時改變。我們的理想是全民參與，卻有各式各樣的人被正式排除在體制之外。這種排除符合當權者的政治利益，因此他們有意讓一部分人無法登記投票。這正是美國現有的一大問題。那些為了政治利益拋棄民主的政客會說：「我不想讓那些人投票，因為他們可能會投票反對我，所以我要找到迂迴的方式來讓他們投不了票。」儘管如此，隨着民主的不斷發展，它更勝以往，執行也更為充分。另一方面，一旦有更多的民眾參與民主，民主自身也會出現問題。我對人們所說的「公民社會」很感興趣。公民社會存在於政府之外，是民主體制的一個非正式性組件。權力監察者日益壯大，紙媒當然是其中一員。此外，各式各樣的私營機構、智囊團和志願者組織也加入其中，在公共討論中發表重要意見，密切監測他們感興趣的任何一個議題。因此我認為應該重新修正把新聞媒體視作第四權的觀點。新聞媒體和公民社會都應算作是第四種政治權力。

**HY:** 您提出的是一種融合性的，或者說是綜合性的第四權？

**MS:** 是的，一種更具綜合性的第四權。我們有倡議性組織，譬如人權觀察組織。總的來說，新聞機構與所有這些非政府組織在政治體系中所起到的作用越來越大。他們的憲法權利和結社自由是否受



到保障，這點至關重要。就算不具備正式的憲法權利，這類民間組織也在世界許多地區日益蓬勃發展起來。

**HY:** 您實際上是採取社會學的研究途徑來解讀媒體、非政府組織和公民生活？

**MS:** 可以這麼說。因為新的新聞生態實質上也是新政治生態的一部分。

**HY:** 新媒體時代的到來是您論述的「好公民」的福音嗎？新媒體成為了民主進程中的連接紐帶。有人認為新媒體對民主至關重要，有人則視之為喉舌。對此，您的觀點較為中立。具體而言，您認為它對於民主的作用究竟是重要、抑或是不那麼重要呢？

**MS:** 我對新媒體的興趣並不主要是因為它帶來了一種新的民主模式，讓每個人時刻都可以參與政治。現在似乎只需打開電腦，移動滑鼠，點「讚」，就可以讓我們隨時對一切事物表達自己的投票意願。儘管這種方式有一定意義，但我不認為這是真正的現代民主模式，我是一個歷史學者，非常懷疑「民主即全民參與」的觀點。我並不認為這是社會運作的絕佳模式。非理性情緒的傳染效應確實存在。我出生在第二次世界大戰以後，但我的父親參加過二戰。在我個人的記憶裏，1933年希特勒經民選成為德國總理。我認為不應該把民主定義為「全民參與」。所謂民主，是指「成年人有權並被鼓勵參與投票、發表意見，或與正式機構結盟」。只有在公民政治權利受到保護的框架之下，才会有民主。這是對民主定義的巨大修正。現代社會大多數決策過程都錯綜複雜，往往是由代表做主，而不是通過「全民投票」。這些代表有自己的助理團隊，會將決策權交給政府的行政機構。必須有人去監察這些行政機構。立法機構、新聞媒體和民間社會團體的監督角色至關重要，以確保權力對民意負責。民主通過各機構間的權力分配而得以實現，而不是全民共赴市鎮廣場，每人一票（只有競選存在勢均力敵的對手並且雙方持不同主張，投票才能在實踐中實現民主）。

**HY:** 談談您自己的研究經驗和對學生們的建議吧。首先想問您的博士論文，您的論文出版成了一部經典之作（《探索新聞：美國報業社會史》，*Discovering the News: A Social History of American*

*Newspapers*)。很多人受此啟發，嘗試相似的研究路徑。能否與我們分享一些您的研究經驗？

MS: 我遵循的是社會學的視野和方法。就讀博士期間我的專業是社會學，這對我影響很大。同樣對我影響至深的還有兩位教過我的知名教授，其中一位是丹尼爾·貝爾(Daniel Bell)。他是一名記者，負責《財富》雜誌勞工問題的報導。他熱心政治，為很多雜誌撰寫了大量文章。那時他在哥大教授大一新生的通識教育課程。後來，他將自己發表的文章匯集出版，這部名為《意識形態的終結》(*The End of Ideology*)的文集產生了很大影響。書中的很多選文都來自於貝爾發表在雜誌上的作品。當時，他已經在哥大執教，哥大校方認為他應該有個博士學位。我們給他一個博士學位吧，就憑那本書。但他實際上並沒有在研究所學習過，那本書也是他獨立完成的。貝爾是我的博士論文指導老師。另一位對我影響至深的教授是大衛·里斯曼(David Riesman)，一位知名的社會學學者，卻只有法律專業的高級學位。他做過律師，曾擔任最高法院大法官路易士·布蘭戴斯(Louis Brandeis)的助手。里斯曼跟貝爾的執教經歷類似，兩人同期在芝加哥大學的通識教育部門教過書。里斯曼之後入職芝加哥大學社會學系。同樣，他也沒有接受過研究所教育。因此，雖然我有社會學的教育背景，這兩位未被專業同化的教授卻給了我很大影響。作為興趣廣泛的知識分子，他們不是特別在意研究方法，我也是。在方法上我嘗試做到謹慎，努力做到自我批評，講求邏輯性與實證性。

對青年學者和研究生我有一條建議。讀研究所期間，我選修了一門繪畫課程，初衷是為了消遣，和博士學業無關，只是想嘗試一些新事物。然而正是這門課，讓我深受啟發。在課上寫生時，老師撇開單純的說教，而是察看我們的畫作，逐個給出建議。他盯着我的畫說：「畫出你看到的實物。」我回答說自己就是這樣做的。可是他卻說：「不，你不是。你畫的是自己認為應該看得到的實物。你的腦子裏有自己的一套理論，認為人像看起來應該是這樣的，就這麼畫了。現在別管甚麼理論，把注意力就放在離你十二英尺遠的模特身上。如果她的膝蓋比其它身體部位離

你更近一些，是不是應該比你畫上的更大一些才對呢？」沒錯，他是對的。必須仔細觀察眼前的事物，忠實描繪你的所見。假使我能使我的研究生們做到這一點，我就是一個非常成功的教師了。大學樂在其中，也令人沉醉——至少是在人文和社會科學學科。研究生完全沉醉在理論之中，被理論弄得暈頭轉向。理論很美，卻不是真理。理論只是組織真理的一種方式。所謂的真理就是，要努力了解這個世界，繪出你的所見。這並不容易。雖然聽起來簡單，卻很難從腦海中抹去舊學的窠臼。為了看清眼前的事實，我們每天都有意做這樣的嘗試，卻又在不經意間忘得一乾二淨。

另一點是，為論文找一個屬於自己的問題。有甚麼是值得去做的？有甚麼是在兩年甚至更長的時間中不會讓我們感到厭倦乏味甚至憎惡自己的？我時常提醒學生要去留意那些讓他們鄙視，甚至感到不快的課程閱讀材料。譬如X教授或Y學者的那番講話把他們逼急了，我就會問：「哦，你認為X教授是真的錯了。你能說出他錯在甚麼地方嗎？」那是可能找到自己想法的地方。很多學術思想都是帶有辯證性的，你針對一種觀點提出不同的意見。如果有學生說「教授，這個理論太棒了，我要把它應用到這裏」，我對這樣的學生並不感興趣。在我看來，所有的理論都是錯的，它們只是截取了世界的一角。你當然可以去應用一個理論，但前提是你必須明白一定有這個理論無法適用的地方。這就是為甚麼你要去重新思考、批判某個理論的原因。如果你能在理論與實證之間來回求證，那就很了不起了。沒有任何研討會或課程能夠教給我們一通百通的理論。社會學家要做的是更好的理解人類世界。這並不容易，因為人類世界非常複雜。我們知道人類存在個體差異，社會、文化存在民族差異。制度也可以有不同建構，並帶來歷史改變。變異總是體現在廣泛和重要的不同層面上。沒有任何理論可以解釋所有的這些層面。各式各樣的理論可以服務於不同的領域。我們需要去完善這些理論概念。然而往往我們做不到這一點。「所有理論都是錯的」這句話或許有些重了，換用一個更嚴謹的說法，我認為所有的理論都有缺陷。我們應當明白這些理論

最終都需要修改。研究生常常會過分看重固定點，一味尋找堅實的認知基礎。他們實在不應對理論過分樂觀。研究生應該學會建立批判視角與懷疑態度，甚至是針對那些最吸引他們的理論。這也是從另外一個角度說明「需要忠實描繪所見」的道理。他們需要對試圖了解的世界保持關注，仔細觀察，保持好奇心，提出問題。有一種觀點認為問題比答案更重要，我是贊同的。

**HY:** 傳統意義上的新聞傳媒學研究分為兩大陣營。一個是主流的行政取向，另一個則是批判取向，譬如政治經濟學和文化研究學派。我們知道您的研究路徑是社會學的取向。對此，您能簡要評論一下這種傳播學中的學派劃分嗎？這種劃分還有根據嗎？根據我的觀察，當下兩大陣營都會借鑒彼此的研究方法。最初，他們的意識形態、研究假設和方法都大相徑庭，而如今卻未必如此。但一些人認為這種劃分仍然存在。您似乎沒有特別贊同任何一方，並且您已經形成了自己的一套社會學治學方法。

**MS:** 當我從社會學轉向傳播學研究時，已經形成了大致的治學取向。在接觸到行政學派與批判學派的類別劃分之前，我就已經撰寫了兩本書。我認為這種劃分不無道理。我很喜歡拉札斯菲爾德 (Paul Lazarsfeld) 的文章。他一直試圖連通兩大學派，與阿多諾 (Theodor Adorno，法蘭克福學派代表人物) 合作，發掘兩大學派的長處。然而後來，這種嘗試被批判學派連根拔起，他們大力攻擊傳統量化研究。這就是二十五年前我身處的學術圈——過於自以為是，批判成了一種時髦。在我看來，所謂的「批判」就是絕不接受你面前的世界。你不僅要去批判權力，而且還要把批判權力當作首要職責。對此我感到不大舒服，部分原因是我所認識的這類人總是欠缺學者應當具備的批判性。學者應勇於自我批判、釐清社會現實。然而，這類人往往確信自己已經知道世界應該是怎樣的，然後在此基礎上展開工作。我欣賞他們的這份篤定，卻不能認同。我並不知道世界應該是怎樣的。在某些方面也許我知道，但作為學者，我要做的是釐清現實事物是如何運轉的。這很難，也很有趣，值得我用一輩子去探索。但是我也有自己的政治立場，我支持民主。並不是說我對世界應有的秩序沒有自己的觀點，但這與

我所認知的現實秩序是分隔開來的。我通過過往的每一個研究項目，都得出了一些未經預期的結論。這才是學術的樂趣所在。

**HY:** 行政學派依然會被視作是傳播學的主流學派嗎？

**MS:** 我認為各學派已開始有了融合。在一些成功的實例中，傳播學研究已經引入了批判取向，後現代主義取向，或兩者的結合。有一類極端的批判研究仍舊只是落入意識形態的巢臼。他們並不是想了解這個世界，只是一味表明他們的政治立場。然而有另一類批判研究卻能另闢蹊徑：「好吧，我們需要更加關注性別、種族、階級，我們就這樣做吧。」他們把研究視角放在種族、性別、階級等一些長期被忽略的議題上。這非常棒，我認為這帶來了真正的改變，並且這種改變是積極的。

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Academic Dialogue with **Michael SCHUDSON**

## **Communication Study from a Sociological Perspective: Journalism, Democracy and its Future**

MS: Michael SCHUDSON

HY: Yu HUANG

**HY: The news media have experienced a myriad of changes in the past twenty years. In 2009 you published “The Reconstruction of American Journalism” with Leonard Downie Jr., which has garnered worldwide readership. In this very influential report you talked about the future of American journalism. To us, it serves as an inspiring index of leadership. Four years later, when you look back on this report, do you have any new views? Is there any need for further improvement?**

MS: I looked at it again not long ago. The part that got the most attention was a set of proposals. I think the better part was all the other stuff—the analysis of where things were. In 2008 and 2009 when people all of a sudden saw the depth of the crisis of American journalism.

**HY: The financial tsunami broke out in 2008.**

MS: Right. The people in journalism had already been in trouble, quite apart from the general financial downturn. But in a way the press was slow to respond. There was a lot of talk, and a lot of journalists were hopeful about the new technology. But the news organizations were seeing their profits withering away. That was a big deal because Craigslist and other online advertising sites just wiped out newspapers' classified advertising, which represents a significant amount of income (25%–35%) for most American newspapers. Basically it disappeared overnight because everyone could announce sales of used cars or rental apartments for free. The journalism school here at Columbia was just beginning to move into a new position where they were not only training journalists but also studying journalism as an institution with a small Ph.D. program. A new

master program was emerging in which “History of Journalism” course would become a requirement. The dean, Nicholas Lemann, was interested in getting the journalism school's voice involved in this broad conversation. Our “Reconstruction” report was Dean Lemann's idea.

In retrospect, what I was most pleased about with the report is its general tone of what I called “guarded optimism.” We were trying to find a middle ground between the newsroom responses by the summer of 2009, which bemoaned the great American institution disappearing down the drain, and those who embraced the new technology as full of utopian possibilities, which seemed to us far too hopeful. But we thought there were reasons for hope. There were also reasons to be distressed as people watched their colleagues lose their jobs. Our “guarded optimism” sympathized with the people losing their jobs but we did not sympathize with the view that American journalism was just the greatest thing ever invented. Earlier, Downie wrote a book called *The News About the News*, which is very critical of American journalism. It says television news—local television news—could disappear tomorrow and the country would not be any worse off for it. And he was certainly willing to criticize the American news. I am, too. So we were about on the same page.

The proposals are comprised of two sorts. Several of the proposals were basically saying that “here are some developments we see that are good and they should continue.” For example, the non-profit news organizations that have been springing up all over the country. They looked good to us, and we want to say to philanthropists—“support news organizations that are valuable to your communities.” The conventional legacy news organization is in big trouble. But many journalists are working to find new models and put some money into it. That has already been going on. We didn't have to invent it.

**HY:** And now it continues.

**MS:** Right. It continues. The universities were beginning to produce news for the general public. That seems like a perfectly good idea. Writing news stories is not the same as doing brain surgery. You can have relatively inexperienced people produce relatively good work under



the guidance of experienced supervisors and teachers. Do more of that. Those things continue, and they are growing in fact. They produced actually extremely good work in some cases, including Columbia J-school. But our recommendation that got the most attention was that the federal government should put some money into this. News seems to have become one of those public goods that the private sector is not adequately supporting any more. So the government can be useful. In fact, most American journalists who read and commented on the report said “this is a good report, except for this recommendation which is horrible, dangerous and ridiculous”.

**HY: You mean the government funding?**

MS: Yes, the government funding.

**HY: Some European countries, especially Scandinavian countries have government funding.**

MS: They do, such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France and Austria. There are some direct financial subsidies from state agencies to news organizations, which, however, do not turn their independent new media into agencies of the state. That is in the newspapers. For broadcasting, we know of course there are state subsidies. The BBC is the single most influential example. And in all of these cases, ways have been developed to insulate the news organizations from the funding organizations, like the government. We thought there was no reason on earth we could think of why the US couldn't do something like that. Actually we do something like that in the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio. The state contribution is relatively small. But it was there from the beginning. It is real money. And in the case of National Public Radio, it helped to create one of the great journalism success stories of the past half century in this country. National Public Radio is a fine news organization. It began in 1970 and didn't exist before. Then we have other examples in our minds—The National Science Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The National Endowment for the Humanities, all of which support different aspects of knowledge industries. And they have developed ways of protecting the artists, professors and scientists and shielding their work from the influence from the funding source. Why can't we do this with journalism? I

think we could. It would not be easy. And it's not going to happen. I mean there is zero interest in the federal government, no interest at all for the politicians to do anything that we proposed. So I'll never have to worry whether we were wrong because our idea will never be tested. But it seems to us important to put that on the table. This is a serious problem we have in front of us. We need to think outside the box about how to solve it. As it turns out, that proposal hasn't gone anywhere and isn't going anywhere. But maybe there is some value to have it out there in the public domain, and to promote some thinking about this.

**HY: Another possible reason is that after 2009 the news industry was not as bad as people had predicted. Some of the vulnerable media have already survived.**

MS: Yes. I think what people in 2014 don't necessarily understand about this is that relatively few newspapers have died. They are dying in a somewhat higher rate than they had been from the 1950s onward. Based on the data, we are losing roughly 20 newspapers per year. It used to be 10 or so. In terms of actual deaths of newspapers, there have been relatively few. In terms of the thinning of newsrooms and the reduction of services, however, that has been huge. Particularly notable are lost jobs at large metropolitan daily newspapers. *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Miami Herald*, and *The Los Angeles Times* have each lost hundreds of reporters, from one third to one half of their staff. At the same time, I asked a question recently in a talk: if you have lots of money, and you could rehire as many reporters as it would take to be able to produce quality work, how many would you need to rehire? Maybe just half of them. Because reporters are more efficient in newspapers than they used to be. The internet actually makes a difference. The resources online are extraordinary.

**HY: This is what you called the “new journalism ecosystem”? A lot of people are quite interested in this notion. What is it about? Could you elaborate a bit on it?**

MS: The word “news ecology” or “ecosystem” is just a kind of language magic. There is a lot of stuff happening, which is all related and happening all at once. The different pieces are capable of cooperating

and living in the same environment together. And nobody knows how exactly it is going to turn out. It depends very much on trial and error. If you think back a few years, Twitter is a start-up which is now pretty much essential to American journalists and this is increasingly true around the world.

**HY: There are equivalents in China. The WeChat social networking app is doing better than Facebook in China. Weibo is more similar to Twitter. If people know English, they will probably use both the Chinese and U.S. versions. Various choices keep people really busy.**

MS: When I first heard about Twitter, which enables users to send 140-character messages, it sounded ridiculous and crazy. And now people find it indispensable. There is no central office that says we need something like Youtube. Now you can have a user-generated encyclopedia online. It turns out that a lot of people with spare time—who are experts in this little corner or that little corner of knowledge—contribute to Wikipedia in their specialty. It's an extraordinary tool. Meanwhile, various online organizations and the new start-ups started teaming up with the New York Times, local public broadcasting stations, or local newspapers, as nobody went to their websites as destinations initially. And this was also a big change in the journalistic culture. You were never supposed to cooperate with your competitors. Now people are doing it all the time. That is part of the new news ecology too. It is changing so rapidly that no one knows how to describe it. But it is important.

**HY: You once mentioned in your book *The Power of News* that news should be the locus of power instead of its mouthpiece. Recently you suggested creating a national fund for local news. In your opinion, do news media act as a promoter or hindrance in the democratic process? The reason for this question is that one of your recent books has been translated into Chinese. They sparked off a lively debate among the academic community. The U.S. experience is like a mirror to China where the social condition is different. But that doesn't prevent Chinese intellectuals from participating in debates and thinking about it.**

MS: Regarding my works on democracy, particularly, *The Good Citizen*:

*A History of American Civic Life*, there is really a conversation in my head with Jürgen Habermas and the idea of a public sphere. I agree with Habermas that the modern world of liberal democracy emerged in Western Europe and the U.S. in the late 18th and 19th century. The ideal that emerged in the American and French revolutions later inspired the world—in the West certainly, but to some extent beyond the West. We are the children of the Enlightenment to the extent that the power of science and the ideal of inquiry are universal. We all inherit this from that moment of creative ferment in the 18th century. Habermas also says that was the moment in which public life itself changed. But he certainly mixes the idea of a public sphere that we should all be striving for with a notion that there was a moment when it actually existed in London and Paris in the coffee houses. In the American case, this early public sphere was not something most of us would approve today. No women were involved; there were only white men. There were only white men of property. And it took a long time, basically the entire 19th century and the early 20th century, to expand the realm of who people thought should be part of the public. So my book asked: what did public life look like in different moments in American history? And my conclusion laid out in the book is that there really have been different periods of American democracy. It's not been the same thing in each moment. I think it has grown and become better overall in our 200 past years. But even that is not always clear. What we mean by democracy has changed from time to time. The ideal is that everyone participates somehow. Various people are formally excluded from the system. Some are kept out of the system because it's to the political advantage of the empowered to make it more difficult to register to vote. That is one of our current American problems. For political advantages people abandon the ideal of democracy altogether and say "I don't want these people to vote because they might vote against me, so I'm going to find devious ways to keep them from voting." And yet as democracy develops over time, it seems—for the most part—it's gotten better and has been enacted more fully than it used to be. Democracy has its own problems when you get more people involved in democratic participation. I'm quite interested in what people call civil society, the non-formal part of democracy outside the government. Speaking of the great expansion of watchdogs on

power, the press clearly is one of them. All kinds of private organizations, think tanks and voluntary associations have important voices in public discussions and debates, closely monitoring whatever may be the specific topic which they are interested in. I think the notion of the news media as the fourth branch of government should be revised. The news media and other institutions of civil society are the fourth branch of government.

**HY: So you are proposing a combination, or the comprehensive fourth branch?**

MS: Yes, a much more comprehensive fourth branch than it used to be. There are advocacy groups, say, Human Rights Watch. And basically news organizations and all these NGOs are becoming more and more an important part of the political system. It seems to me vital that they have guaranteed constitutional rights and freedom of association. But even without formal constitutional rights, this kind of NGO is increasingly thriving in many parts of the world.

**HY: You are actually using a sociological approach to understand media, NGOs and civic life?**

MS: Yes, the new ecology of news is also part of the larger new political ecology.

**HY: Is the arrival of the new media age the gospel of “good citizens”? The new media are connecting the democratic process of our life. Some people regard new media as vital to democracy, while others are using them as the mouthpiece. You are not extreme. So you consider new media to be important, but not so important?**

MS: Right. My enthusiasm for new media is not primarily because this is a new model of democracy and that we all can participate in politics all of the time. You can go to your computer, click, “like” this or that on the website. You can sort of express “like” voting on anything all the time. There is something in that, but I don't think that is really how a modern democracy works. I am a historian who is very skeptical about thinking that democracy is everyone participating all the time. I don't think that's such a great model of how to run a society. There is really such a thing as contagious irrational passions. I was born after World War II, but my father fought in World War II.

It was within my personal experience to remember Hitler who was, after all, elected to office in 1933. Well, I don't think you define democracy by "everyone-is-participating." You define democracy by—"yes, all adults are empowered, encouraged to participate in voting and speaking their mind, in associating with formal organizations as they wish." But this is democracy only within a framework of protected human civil political rights. That is a major modification. Most of the decisions are complicated in modern societies, and they will be made by representatives, not by "everyone-is-voting". We will need representatives who themselves will have a staff of assistants and who will delegate much of their decision making to administrative agencies in the government. Somebody has to watch those agencies. The legislature is a watcher. The press is a watcher. The civil society organizations are watchers, and that watching—holding powers accountable to public ideals—is very important. It happens through distributed authority to this array of organizations. It is not everyone going out to the Town Square and voting. (And voting itself is in practice democratic only if there are rival candidates for office and two or more of them offering different views and values have a chance of winning.)

**HY: Let's talk about your own research experience and your advice to students. First of all I would like to ask you about your Ph.D. thesis. Your thesis turns out to be a very influential book (*Discovering The News: A Social History of American Newspapers*), which has inspired lots of people to produce something similar. Tell us something about your research experience.**

MS: Well, I have a sociological outlook. My Ph.D. is in sociology. That is important. Equally important is my professors who were most influential for me were two quite famous people. Daniel Bell was a journalist. He covered labor issues for *Fortune* magazine. He was quite a political person, and he wrote a lot in a variety of public magazines. And then he was teaching here in Columbia in the freshmen liberal education program. At some point, he published a collection of essays called *The End of Ideology*, which is very influential. But a lot of those essays in that book began as published articles in the magazines. At that time, he was already teaching at Columbia University. The University said he should have a Ph.D.

Let's give him a Ph.D. for that book. But he didn't study in graduate school. He wrote the book on his own. Bell was my dissertation advisor. I was also much influenced by David Riesman, another very famous sociologist. But his only advanced degree is a law degree. He was a lawyer, a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis. He taught like Bell and actually with Bell at the University of Chicago in their general education program. He became part of the sociology department at Chicago. And again, he never went to graduate school. So I have sociological background, but I was also with the people in a sense who were not socialized in this profession. They were intellectuals with broad interests. For better or worse, they were not particularly careful about research methods, like me. I try to be careful about the method in the sense of being self-critical, trying to be logical, and trying to be empirical.

But I have a single advice for young scholars or graduate students. It was advice I got when I took a drawing class—just for fun—while I was in graduate school. It has nothing to do with my Ph.D as I wanted to do something different. But it turned out that I learned a great lesson from it. We students were drawing a model. The teacher did not lecture but just looked at our drawings and made suggestions here and there. He stared at what I was drawing and said, “Draw what you see.” And I said, “That's what I'm doing.” He said, “No, you are not. You are drawing what you think you should see. You have a theory in your head of what the human figure is supposed to look like on a page, and that is what you are drawing. Get rid of that theory, and look at the figure twelve feet from you here. If her knee is a little closer to you than the rest of her, doesn't it look a little bigger than what you have just drawn?” He was right. Yes! You really have to look closely at what is in front of you and draw what you see. Those four words. If I can get my graduate students to draw what they see, I would be a very successful teacher. Universities are so enchanted and enchanting, at least in the humanities and social sciences. Graduate students get completely enchanted, and I would say mystified, by theories. Theories are beautiful, but they are not the truth. They are ways of organizing the truth. The truth is that you are trying to grasp the world out there, drawing what you see out there. It is not easy. It sounds easy but it's very difficult to—in a way, to erase from your mind too much of the stuff we have learned so that

you can see what is in front of you. We will learn to do it in everyday life and we all forget it in everyday life.

The other thing I tell students is to find their own question for their dissertation. What is really worth pursuing? What can they find in the scholarship to which they can devote two years and sometimes even longer without completely getting bored and hating themselves? I sometimes urge them to pay attention to the things that they come upon and really despise in their readings for the courses, something that irritates them terribly. For example, Professor X, or Scholar Y said such and such that just drove them so crazy. Then I would like to ask—"Oh, you think Professor X is really wrong. Can you say why it is really wrong?" That's where you might find your idea. A lot of scholarship is dialectical—you are posing something against something else. I'm not interested in the students who say "oh, Professor, that great theory is written and I will apply it over here." All theories are wrong. That is my view. They pick up only a piece of the world. You could apply a theory to something, but only if you know that there is something out in the world that will not fit it. And that is what forces you to rethink the theory and criticize the theory. If you can do that kind of back-and-forth between the empirical and theoretical, that would be great. There will not be any seminar or any class you take where some handy theory does the whole job. It seems to me that our job as social scientists is to understand the human world better than we did before. This is not easy because the human world is very complicated. We know there are individual differences among people. There are national differences across the society and cultures. There are institutions that are structured differently and create historical changes. There are always vast and important dimensions of variation. We don't have any theories that capture all of that. We have various theories that do serviceable work in different areas. And refining our concept is very important. But it is worth remembering at the same time that all of our efforts fall short. I mean it is a little dramatic to say that all theories are wrong. To say it in a more measured way, all theories fall short. After all we know that eventually we change them. And I think graduate students in particular are looking a little too much for some anchor, some solid cognitive ground that they can take with them. Well, they should not be too hopeful about that. What they will learn is a kind of general



critical outlook or general skepticism even about those theories by which they are most attracted. This is another way of saying that they need to draw what they see. They need to stay attentive to the world they are trying to understand. Look at it closely. Be curious about it, and ask questions. Some people say the questions are more important than the answers, and I would be in that camp.

**HY: Traditionally, journalism and media studies are divided into two camps. One is the mainstream administrative approach. Another is the critical approach, like political economy and cultural studies. We know that you have developed your own sociological approach. Could you briefly comment on this division? Is it still valid? I have noticed that nowadays actually both sides use each other's methodology to study something. Originally, their ideology, research hypotheses, and research methods were all very different. It is now no longer the case. But in terms of classification, some people are still thinking that way. You actually don't put your foot on either side. You have developed your own, which might be called the sociological approach.**

MS: By the time I shifted my main academic locus from sociology to communication, I had already had my general intellectual approach settled. I had already written two books by the time I encountered that distinction between the administrative and critical approaches. The distinction makes some sense to me. I rather like Lazarsfeld's essay. He is trying to bridge the distinction, to figure out how to work with Adorno and how to see something good in both of the two approaches. But later it got taken off by critical scholars as a hammer with which to beat the more conventional, usually quantitative work. It was the circle of which I was part 25 years ago, but it became too smug, I think, and "critical." Too much of a fetish. What the word "critical" is meant to say is that you have to not accept the world as it had been handed to you. You have to be not only willing to criticize power but you have to see criticizing power as your primary job. I wasn't comfortable with that, in part because the people I know who are most committed to that position didn't in fact seem to me critical in the ways that I thought a scholar should be, which is to say self-critical and eager to figure out the world as it is. They were convinced that they already knew what the world should be. And

from that basis, they did their work. I had some admiration for that kind of certainty. But I didn't share it. I didn't know exactly how the world should be. I mean I did in some way, but that is separable from what I did as a scholar—which is trying to figure out how things worked. That is hard. For me this is really interesting enough to keep me busy for a lifetime. But I have political views and I'm an advocate of democracy. It is not like I don't have ideas about how things should be. But I think that is somewhat separable from what I think things are. Every research project I have undertaken has led me to some conclusion I didn't anticipate. That's why scholarship is a fun job.

**HY: Is the administrative approach still considered the mainstream school of communication?**

**MS:** I think there has been a kind of blend. I mean there have been some real successes of the critical approach, postmodern approaches, and notably the integration of them into communication research. In an extreme form I think some part of so-called critical studies is just ideology. I don't think they are learning about the world. They are just telling you what their political views are. But there's other work under the same broad umbrella, say, “well, we need to pay more attention to gender, race and class. Let's do that.” They pay attention to race, gender and class, long neglected topics, and integrate them into a broader understanding of how communication works. That's great and I think that has made a real difference, a positive difference.

### Selected Works by Michael Schudson

Please refer to the end of the Chinese version of the dialogue for Michael Schudson's selected works.