

Reflecting on Forty Years of Sociology, Media Studies, and Journalism: An Interview with Todd Gitlin and Michael Schudson

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Submitted: September 4, 2020 – Accepted: September 5, 2020 – Published: September 18, 2020

Abstract

Reflecting on more than four decades in dual scholarly careers that cut across the boundaries between communication, the sociology of culture, and journalism studies, Professor Todd Gitlin and Professor Michael Schudson discuss the growth, evolution, and strengths and weaknesses of the media studies field with Professor Jiang Chang. The three reflect on the origins of the research, the gap between the field of journalism studies and the field of sociology, the role played by journalism in the growing conflict between China and the United States, the relationship between media and political protest, and whether there ought be any cause for optimism regarding the state of democracy in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: American Sociological Association; China; culture; Fox News; journalism studies; sociology.

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Jiang Chang: Thank you both. Okay. I'm really honored to do this. The first question is, can you describe your own intellectual history in graduate school? You were involved enrolled in the prestigious sociology department, but you ended up writing dissertation on journalism and media. So was this common at the time? Why was there such a flowering of media studies within sociology in the 1970s?

Michael Schudson: So that's really two questions I guess: how did I get to this topic and why was sociology in general moving toward this topic. The answer of how I got to the topic is somewhat accidentally! I wasn't strictly interested in media, I was interested in professions. And the dissertation that I wrote compared the emergence of notions of professionalism and objectivity in journalism and in law. And later, after that was finished, and I was considering turning the dissertation into a book, I sent it around to a few people, all of whom said the journalism part is really interesting. The law part really isn't. So, it became a book about the rise of objectivity in journalism. There was still little general interest in the media at the time, within sociology. I remember telling people that it was my "Watergate Dissertation" — that law and journalism were the two professional fields (or professionalizing fields in the case of journalism) that were constantly in the news at the time I was coming to a dissertation topic. So those were the ones I worked on.

It took a while, in some ways not until my second book — on advertising, that I said, "oh, I study media." And as you know, although the institutionalization of journalism studies as such came many years after that, there was a turn more broadly to studies of media, popular culture in the news media, particularly because of the political moment — the anti-war movement, the various rights movements evolving at the time, all very much present among younger sociologists and graduate students. And everyone I knew was a critic of the news media. Todd [Gitlin]'s work was very important in pushing people further in that direction, *The Whole World is Watching* comes out 1979, I think soon after *Discovering the News*. So does Dan Schiller's book, on objectivity in the news. Gaye Tuchman's "News as a Strategic Ritual" appeared prominently in *American Journal of Sociology* in 1974. I think she was a real pioneer. I'd also heard that [Herbert] Gans was also working on the news media but that he'd been working on this for many years off and on, finally publishing *Deciding What's News* in 1979, I believe. But I think this was all a response to public events and a new, critical take on journalism, and the fact that a great many standard practices of journalism seemed to be inadequate to the moment.

Todd Gitlin: I'm not sure what the right answer is. Let me explain about my own graduate school trajectory. It was unusual. I did a Master's degree at the University of Michigan in Political Science in 1963 to 1965. When I was deeply involved in student radical activity. I was involved with the organization Students for a Democratic Society and very much involved in organizing for Civil Rights, against South African Apartheid and American corporate connections, and then against the Vietnam War.

For the next nine years I worked as a political organizer or community organizer, and a journalist, and that was the core of my life. I wrote quite a lot of poetry too, and a book about community organizing in Chicago, but primarily I published journalism in what we then called the "underground press," which was not literally underground but was alternative, a more impassioned form of journalism than the traditional kind.

When I decided to go back to the university I wasn't originally planning to write about media. I decided to go to Berkeley, I was living in San Francisco. I was looking for a program that would be unconfining, that would be relatively open to my various interests, which were not only sociological but cultural and literary. I also had grand — and I would now say grandiose

— theoretical ambitions when in the late 1960s I started to become influenced by the idea that we had entered into a post scarcity society. And I was interested in the concept of scarcity. So when I decided to go back to get a Ph.D. at Berkeley, my initial thought was that I would try to write an intellectual history of the idea of scarcity. Now, I had not intended to go on with media studies.

After taking a year of courses and passing my qualifying exams, for which I submitted quite a lot of previously published work, one of my professors, Bob Blauner, told me that he liked an article I had written in early 1969 about the mutual influences of the media and the student movement. He thought that was a promising topic. I had written this piece for a New Left nonacademic journal, *Leviathan*, while out of school. I had read very little of the sociological literature on media; or on movements, for that matter. But I had a lot of experience and I had observations which were, I would say, both intuitive and earned through reflection on experience. The article, “14 Notes on Television and the Movement,” was quite speculative. But it had in it some of the ideas about the interaction between media and the new rough that I later developed. A couple of years later I revised it (“Sixteen Notes”) for publication in the literary journal *Tri-Quarterly*.

So Bob Blauner said to me, “I thought that was a very interesting piece. Why don’t you develop it?” And that was actually the first time I thought about doing so. A professor’s suggestion can be mighty powerful! In fact, if I had been stubborn and kept to my plan of writing the intellectual history of the idea of scarcity, I would still be working on that, I’m sure. In any event, I had been interested in media for years, in a way that combined curiosity and lack of discipline. In graduate school at Berkeley, I spent a whole year catching up on the disciplinary field, and was rather astonished and appalled, frankly, at how thin it was. That led me, in 1976, to write my critique of the dominant paradigm (which was published in *Theory and Society* in 1978).

I wrote it because I wanted to digest and react to my underwhelming experience of reading the field. Then I started to encounter other sociologists of more or less my generation who were working on media in a fresh way. One was Michael Schudson, the other was Gaye Tuchman. They were the prime ones, along with the slightly older Harvey Molotch, then at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who had written an important article after the big oil spill in 1970, first in a popular journal and eventually in an academic journal. “Accidents, Scandals and Routines,” he and his co-author called it — a very detailed attempt to reconstruct the process by which events become news.

Now, at that time, I was largely unaware that there was a field called Communications. There was a Ph.D program in Communications at Stanford, but for me their behaviorist empiricism would have been too narrow. I was in a Sociology department because I aspired toward a sociological imagination. My advisors were quite sympathetic to my pursuit of a sociological understanding of media. In fact, my thesis advisor, Bill Kornhauser, many years earlier, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, had participated in some pioneering research in 1951 about television’s representation of a parade to honor General MacArthur after President Truman fired him as commander in Korea. Gladys and Kurt Lang positioned graduate students around the parade in real time and then compared what they observed with the media coverage. Bill Kornhauser was one of the observers, and moreover, he was interested in the concept of mass society. So he was very encouraging. My committee in general, I think, appreciated that the field of Sociology, of media or as we then said, Mass Communication, was quite thin. I knew Herb Gans’ work, which I appreciated, but there wasn’t much else. I still don’t understand quite why the three of us, Michael, Gaye and myself, stumbled into the field more

or less at the same time.

JC: But how did the study of media institutionalize? Because it has been a quite mature discipline worldwide. Why do so many sociologists who studied the media finally decide to leave sociology?

MS: In my case, just to be autobiographical again, the faculty at Harvard sociology who most influenced me were the least sociological in terms of professional connection. My dissertation advisor was Daniel Bell, who was given a Ph.D at Columbia in sociology for already published work in journalism in several different magazines. He was basically a magazine journalist with an insatiable thirst for social and political knowledge. He came to Columbia to teach undergraduates and he wrote an early book about the undergraduate curriculum at Columbia, which is quite an interesting book on general education that contains seeds of several of his later, more famous works.

But he never studied in a graduate school. The other great influence on me was David Riesman, whose only advanced degree was in law. He learned what sociology he learned by teaching undergraduates at the University of Chicago. He taught in the same course that Daniel Bell also taught in — and at the same time. There's a great story Riesman told me about teaching undergrads there in a room next to Daniel Bell's classroom. He could hear the clamor and excitement of students' voices in Bell's class through the wall. It was intimidating when his own students were practically silent! When I knew him, of course, he was world-famous and didn't need to be intimidated by anyone. But I was not socialized in graduate school into learning about the American Sociological Association. I'm not sure Bell or Riesman ever went to an ASA meeting. If they did, they did so as outsiders. They would never have been on committees. They probably never voted in ASA elections. They were sociologists in intellectual orientation, but not in professional orientation or training.

Now at some point, I don't remember the dates, but I started attending ASA meetings. I organized a small, informal group of sociologists there who were interested in culture, popular culture, and so on, and we started meeting, without an agenda, except to learn what one another were doing. Maybe this lasted for three years or so? Had I known more about the ASA, I would have said, "Hey, we should be a section! We should organize ourselves formally within the ASA." But this never occurred to me because I didn't know what a section was, you know, no one had ever taught me that. Or mentioned it to me so far as I know.

And so the Sociology of Culture section at ASA got founded maybe five years after that. And people who knew more about institutions than I did put it together and did all the work to make it happen.

So people drifted elsewhere looking for jobs in a tight job market — and communication was a growing field. And it was, I think it's fair to say, it was an intellectually limited field and one that borrowed almost everything from social psychology and sociology. A little bit from political science, a little bit from elsewhere, but it was an importer of ideas and intellectual traditions, and at that point a lot of people, some of us who sort of accidentally started studying the media, benefited from that. My initial job in University of Chicago was in sociology. There was no communication department there. But my next job, at the University of California, San Diego, also in sociology, came with the understanding that I would teach in the undergraduate communication program that was an interdisciplinary program that only later became a department.

TG: I had a sociological imagination before I went back to graduate school. I carried Sociology with me in my head, or at least aspired to do so. I did not care what was the departmental setting for my thinking. But when I think back on it, in the 1970s, if one wanted to write about

media, one might write straight history, or undertake some empirical research on media effects in political science. For a deeper look, Sociology was the place to be. In my view this was partly because Sociology was not as confined as it later became — not as quantified. Berkeley, I'm happy to say, was the least quantified of the major American departments.

What happened in Sociology was a boom in the study of culture. The culture section of the American Sociological Association rather quickly grew large. It was so large, in fact, that it was in a way ungainly. For better or worse, it became difficult to demarcate the media as such — media institutions, media flows, the relation between media and ideology, between media and other institutions. Perhaps the sociological study of media later dwindled in part because it was subsumed within the larger currents of the sociology of culture.

JC: My next question is about the differences between the study of journalism and the study of media. How is the study of journalism different than the study of the media? Are we too focused on journalism and not enough on larger media systems or is the opposite true?

TG: I am inclined to believe that the study of the media generally is the over-arching framework and that the study of journalism is largely nested within it. I felt this more and more acutely over the years. When I was first writing about media in the 1970s, in my dissertation, I was operating on the premise that the way in which media operate on people is primarily through ideology, through framing, through conceptual impact, and I wrote on that premise. For many years thereafter, some intuition about the shortcomings of that approach nagged at me. I came to think my initial approach to media was too intellectualized. I did a second study in 1980–1981, on television entertainment. Occasionally I had odd thoughts about what I called the ontology of television — what kind of phenomenon is this, the presence of television, the attention to it? What is the nature of its presence in our social life? I scribbled notes and put them in an ontology file. In the end I used almost none of it in my book, *Inside Prime Time*, which came out in 1983.

I had the intuition that if we look at the interaction that takes place between people and media — and here I was thinking particularly about television — the interaction was far more enmeshed in emotional life than purely cognitive life. And that in fact, cognition floated on the surface of emotion. So this long period of rethinking culminated in the book that I wrote in 1999, 2000, and published in 2002, called *Media Unlimited*. There I tried to reconstruct the history of media, including the history of journalism as a subset within the context of the history and sociology of emotion.

Now, some journalists who resent seeing journalism enclosed within the area of media studies. I remember one review of *Media Unlimited* by a journalist who liked the book very much but said, “I don't understand what all this is about the media,” because that's not how he thought of his profession. But I think in a way it's a seed of professional arrogance to think that the way people at large approach journalism is essentially different from the way in which they approach any other kind of media content.

I had a trace of this intuition in my dissertation, *The Whole World is Watching* — that the ways in which journalism gets our attention is not essentially different from the way which it approaches us as entertainment or mood or whatever you want to call it. In other words, a headline or a news photo or even the structure of an article, the forms of emphasis and so on, use a repertory of appeals and approaches which is not essentially different from what a movie maker does or a musician does.

There are differences, of course. Journalism is a special style of media. But I did feel more and more strongly, and continue to feel very strongly, that journalism is an art of human sensation and attention-getting. That it is, in Aristotle's terms, a form of rhetoric. And that among

its rhetorical devices and commitments is to a certain conception of truth. Journalism should not operate the same way cartoonists do. I don't want the Walt Disney company producing the news. But the human interaction is not so different.

MS: Right. Well, again, I'll start autobiographically. In around 2000, probably about 1999 or 2000 or so, I began work on what later became *The Sociology of News* in a WW Norton series that Jeff Alexander edited. And what he had asked me to do was either, I can't remember exactly now, a sociology of culture book, or a sociology of popular culture book. And I said that that's beyond my capacity. It's just too vast a topic. I wouldn't know where to begin. How about a sociology of news? And he said okay. That was what I thought I could handle and what I would enjoy doing and that was my entry (published 2003) in the series.

There is such a thing as a sociology of news. And at that time, we still didn't have journals like *Journalism* or *Journalism Studies*. We would have many others later, but those were just getting off the ground or hadn't started yet. So there gets to be an institutionalization of this study of journalism. (What year did the "Journalism Studies" section of the International Communication Association begin? I suspect a few years after that.) *Journalism Quarterly* (later *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*) existed but it drew contributors and readers largely from J-School faculty with very little interaction with or interest in sociology or history or political science or the more adventuresome developments in communication studies.

When I wrote *The Sociology of News*, you know, I was still teaching at the UCSD Department of Communication. Which had at that point 15, 16, 18 faculty. It was deeply interdisciplinary. All of the early hires had to be appointed in some other department, because communication couldn't make appointments. So Michael Cole was in psychology, Carol Padden was in linguistics. Dan Hallin was in political science. I was in sociology, Chandra Mukerji was in sociology, and so forth, with a 50% appointment in the program on communication. And I think for all of us it was communication that quickly became our real home because it was so much fun. So interesting. And the interdisciplinarity of it was absolutely crucial. People there just loved it and didn't want to be confined to the discipline they had done in graduate school.

So journalism studies now has its own journals. It has its own section of the ICA. It has its own book series through different university presses. It has some affiliations with outside fields. It's notably mixed up with political science through a jointly sponsored journal, *Political Communication*. I think political science especially has been a strong influence on it over the years.

But sometimes I do feel that my younger and intellectually talented colleagues settle too comfortably into "journalism studies" as the world that defines them. People are too content to focus only on journalism as if it were the whole universe. Journalism's a very important institution. But so are political parties. Party systems matter. And so on and so forth. The economy matters. And if you are thinking and writing only about journalism, you're going to miss stuff. And I think media-centrism is an endless danger in journalism studies. Looking at the culture of cultural studies, or the study of culture, more widely would help but so, you know, so would knowing a little about political power. There's a lot besides the news that makes a difference. I once told graduate students that the concept most sorely absent in communication studies is the concept of "institutions." Institutions matter, both in and around the media.

JC: I totally, with you on that journalism scholars sometimes are too satisfied with the field. You know, in China, we even give PhD degrees on just journalism to people and there are a lot of scholars have been advocating for, like a pure journalism studies field for many years. So, maybe these are very different contexts, but still, I think the symptoms are alike everywhere.

My next question is about this special issue, which takes a look at web metrics. There's an argument that web metrics contribute to the potential rationalization of journalistic work, à la Max Weber. But the politics of the last three years seem anything but rational. So is rationalization still a viable thesis in journalism or elsewhere? Or are we in a different era? One that goes beyond this rationalization framework?

TG: There are still elements of journalistic practice that conform to Weber's model of rationalization — which doesn't mean that the products are rational. It means that there are impersonal procedures which are brought into play by the practitioners. They are *instrumentally* rational. There are usually unwritten rules of the form: If X happens, you should do Y. If you talk to one witness about an event you should talk to another witness. Those are rational procedures. Those still apply.

However, the entire ecology of journalism has been transformed by the proliferation of the means of media. Now, I argued in *Media Unlimited* that such transformations are not entirely unprecedented and that if we look at the history of consumption in the West, and the role of media in helping to constitute experience, we see a continuity of development in which new forms develop, new technologies develop, and then take their place among the other technologies. At different times, different ones come to the fore and others retreat into the background.

But the spirit or the sensibility of media is governed by a hunger for speed — speed of transmission and speed of apprehension — and by a search for what I call disposable emotions. The astounding multiplication of media that was taking place in the late 1990s was both new and not new. I mean the magnitude of it was new, the ability to publish, the ability to start a platform with no capital, et cetera, but within a framework of technology diffusion in general.

Let's look at the early history of radio. Radio was first developed in the US as both a military communication device and then as a commercial device. But during that period between World War One and 1927, radio was basically an amateur pursuit, decentralized, a sort of hobby, using shortwave. And it was completely chaotic, which is why the US government stepped in, with the Federal Radio Act in 1927, to rationalize it so that broadcasters did not interfere with each other's frequencies. So even in the case of radio you have this diffusion of initiative. You have this decentralization of the use of media.

And then there was a largely successful attempt by institutions, in that case the state, and of course also commercial enterprises, to rationalize the allocations through licensing. So when you look into that history, what happened in the late 1990s is not quite so surprising. You have a dynamic of expansion and also a dynamic of control and concentration.

MS: I'm struggling with this question. And I did not go back to my Weber see how much he saw rationalization as a description of what was happening, or as normative, something that was good. And maybe we still have that question. Is rationalization a good thing or not? I mean for him it was clearly part of modernization, part of the, as he said at least in the English translation, the "disenchantment of the world," rationality and schemes and systems of rationality and reasoning on the basis of data like people keeping credit and debit account books in businesses as they had not done before the 19th century.

I don't know. Weber wrote at length about religion, he was very interested in religion, and whether he saw the displacement of religion as a good thing I don't know. A Weber scholar would probably be able to answer that, but leaving aside what Weber thought, we can see web metrics and such as a good example of rationalization. Let's leave less to chance and guesswork. Let's know how many people are out there reading how much and for how long and we can measure our impact. You know, we do it too in academia with journal "impact factors." Maybe

we should eliminate and forbid the reporting of journal impact factors and just make our own judgments about whether this journal or that one publishes good work or not.

We have not ultimately rationalized how we, at least here in the United States, deal with hiring and promotion of faculty. It's peer review. And there's some wonderful research on how peer review is conducted and what kind of factors influence it and I have just spent three years on a committee at Columbia that is advisory to the university provost on all tenure decisions across the university. And there's no question there: the numbers matter. And for a scientist, dollars matter: how many and how big the grants are that you've received (ideally from the federal government from NIH or NIMH or NSF. All of that does count, but it is not all that counts. In the end, I would say from my experience, people still ask and want answers to the question of, did this person's work make a difference in this person's field or subfield? I mean my first book is my most cited work. It's not my best work, but it's the most cited one. It would also be very interesting to know whether cited work is cited accurately. From what I have seen, maybe 20 or 25% of those who cite my claims in *Discovering the News* misunderstand what I claimed! So what? Well, when it comes to what matters in tenure decisions, that's not what matters or what should matter. What matters is whether the work is intellectually sound work or not, of a quality deserving of a permanent position at this or that college or university. The numbers help but they don't answer the question.

JS: Well, I like to respond a little bit to your comment about your first book. You know, as your official Chinese translator of that book, I did my very best to at least make the translation clear and accurate. But I don't know how people are going to cite it. But I still think it is a very good contribution. And maybe even if when people are setting it in the wrong way, they still get inspired and enlightened by the book. So maybe it's not that bad thing. That is just my opinion.

MS: You're right. I hope you're right.

JC: Well, it seems that many of the most passionate critics of the institutional press have in the past decade become its defenders, at least in its ideal form. So why do you think this might be?

TG: My goodness. That's a good question. I would say because the political and cultural landscape has changed so dramatically. When I and people like me criticized the mainstream journalism in the 1970s, we were in a sense presupposing the model of rational discourse. We believed that media should be judged by immanent critique. That is, we had in our minds a model of journalism as an approach to transparency in relation to the truth. We then criticized existing journalism against that standard. We pointed out that, contrary to naïve ideas of objectivity, there were frames. Judgements were being made through institutions that had their preferences and priorities, not necessarily self-consciously.

We had, in a funny way, an ideal not so different from Habermas's idea of the ideal speech situation. That is we believed in not only the goodness but the practicality of a model of rational critical discourse, as Habermas called it. So then we held *The New York Times* or CBS or any other institution to account *against* that standard. But we were naïve about how durable that standard was. At just the moment when we were criticizing the performance of the media, the basis for that standard was eroding. Nobody imagined the internet. Now if we go forward to the 1990s, it's clear both in the politics in the US and many other countries, and also throughout the cultural apparatus, that the standard has dissolved.

Now we're contending with the world of competing propaganda. Let me go back for a second. The model of journalism whose development Michael wrote about in his book governed a certain period of American journalism. In fact, it ran more or less from the Progressive era

through the evolution of television up through the 1970s. That triumphalist model exalted journalism at its most heroic. Journalism as the institution that exposes the king, that stands as an independent force to hold power accountable. There was a golden age, institutionally so, so that at the time when I was writing in the 1970s about how CBS covered the 1960s, the three network news broadcasts accounted for more than three quarters of the viewing public.

So when Walter Cronkite, the renowned anchorman on CBS, closed his broadcast by saying, "That's the way it is," he was articulating a norm which had a great deal of credibility. Of course some people disagree: there was a right-wing critique of him. But the norm was reinforced by the great successes of American Journalism in those years. Number one, reporting on Civil Rights activity. Number two, critical reporting on the Vietnam War, which was slow to develop but then did develop very aggressively. Third, coverage of the crimes of the Nixon administration.

Those were the years when young people flocked into journalism schools because now a journalist was a hero, as in "All the President's Men." That world is gone. Because it's gone, those of us who were critical of the mainstream for its distortions and omissions, came to realize the degree to which we actually depended on an assumption of common grounding, a common standpoint that more or less rational people could share and on the basis of which we could make judgements and come to act, as Walter Lippmann famously wrote in *Public Opinion*.

I would just add to what you said before about the golden age of journalism. As you know, the myth of American journalism is that it was always a truth-seeking operation, that it was an enlightenment product, that it was proof of our conviction that you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. But in fact, that's not how American Journalism began. American Journalism was scandalous, wild, often deliberately misleading in order to both accomplish political missions and also to increase readership. In fact, the Golden Age is not typical of the history of journalism in America. It's the exception. And we've now gone back to the period of the 1790s and 1800s and 1810s and 1820s when the news was polemical, partisan, rather hysterical, frequently misleading or straight-out deceitful. In this longer view of the history of American journalism, the golden age of journalism is a parenthetical period. It's not the norm. We have now returned to what was originally the norm, which was wild.

MS: Yeah, I like that question. I think that the premise of the question is right. And I remember noticing that in the British case, when much of the most interesting academic work on the news media was highly critical, it came from scholars on the political left (and that's still the case). But at a certain point as British politics moved to the right in the Thatcher years, some of those scholars started to think, maybe the BBC isn't as bad as we said! And maybe its "even-handedness" is not selling out, maybe it's actually upholding some kind of unintentional modesty that accepts fairness as a professional ideal and turns out to be useful to society.

Journalism has moved strongly (especially since the late 70s in the United States) to a more interpretive style. And I think the extent to which it has done that has not been recognized by American journalists. And I think insufficiently recognized in journalism studies as well. We still worry about what I would like to call an "old fashioned notion of objectivity problem." My own contribution to this was with a former graduate student, Katherine Fink, on the rise of what we called *contextual journalism* and the extensive move towards providing the audience more contextual information. And there are half a dozen other published papers by other people with comparable results, showing that "Hey, guess what? The criticism of standard objectivity from the 1960s and 1970s, took hold! Somebody listened! They listened less to the academics than to other journalists who were making similar criticisms. But the criticisms took hold; if you're just saying, "he said she said," and not making your own judgments about

what actually happened, you're not doing the public a favor. You have the new journalists who are experts in science, sometimes in medicine or public health, or politics in particular. They may have PhDs or M.D.'s but, more often, they don't. They're just smart and savvy writers with a close acquaintance with the people who do help produce new expert knowledge. And these journalists are in a position to say, "some things are plausible, some things are wrong." And today journalists need to say that, obviously in the US with a president who can't stop lying, when the leader of the world's most powerful nation has an unending thirst for winning attention and for just winning, and not a passing thought for making a distinction between what's true or what is likely to be true and what's sheer fantasy or self-serving wishes. Well, "he said, she said" doesn't do the job.

I think more journalists should take courses, or at least listen to a lecture or two on the recent history of journalism. In the US they like to say, "oh, well, journalism all goes back to the First Amendment and the founders believed in the press as watchdogs on government." Well, not really. Thomas Jefferson — who stands as a statue outside Columbia Journalism School — thought prosecuting newspapers for libel was a fine idea: only the states, not the federal government, should do it. You don't hear that very often. Jefferson had very different notions about what the press was about, and the press they were talking about has changed dramatically over time, especially in the last fifty years. And we don't recognize that.

JC: Okay, thank you for this. I wanted to get a bit more contemporary now. Particularly I want to talk about several very big protests that have been shaking both journalism and the word, the #metoo movement or the more recently Black Lives Matter. And it seems that journalism is increasingly taking aside in these political disputes. Do you agree that this is happening?

MS: Yes, I'd agree for the most part. Granted my reading is limited, particularly since the pandemic. The newspaper I read most carefully, *The New York Times*, has long been criticized for being too liberal. At one point, (July 25, 2004) Daniel Okrent, the first "public editor" at the paper (whose task was to fearlessly assess criticism of and complaints about the paper and publish his conclusions) asked in a headline, "Is *The New York Times* a liberal newspaper?" and answered in the column's first sentence: "Of course it is." This was an informal look, not a quantitative study, and he emphasized that the paper was liberal on social issues, notably on same-sex marriage. That was a very interesting column for a *New York Times* insider to write, pointing to a one-sidedness to the kinds of issues and topics that get taken up in in the paper. It doesn't mean you don't quote people accurately, it doesn't mean you don't occasionally have a profile of an interesting anti-abortion activist, but in the preponderance of the news, the liberal bias was obvious 16 years ago. So in that sense, I think, yeah. It might be more even-handed in some other mainstream news media, likely the broadcast television networks, but public editors there would probably still find a liberal tilt.

JC: But the fact that mainstream journalism is more and more taking a position, do you think it is good or bad for democracy?

TG: Is mainstream journalism increasingly taking sides? Yes, with a caveat. The major news organizations are socially liberal, not economically liberal. So for quite a while, in part because of the social classes from which the media elites emerge, they were (eventually, at least) sympathetic to feminism, they were sympathetic to equal rights activities, to gay rights, to the disabled, to minorities of different kinds. Liberal on social questions — not on economic questions. On the subject of economic inequality, the public is actually to the left of the media. But on matters that directly connect to the social experience of the news organizations, they are liberal. So it's not astonishing that the #metoo movement would find a welcome within

mainstream media. And if we look at coverage of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, I see a direct continuity from coverage of the Civil Rights movement and violations of Civil Rights in the late 1950s to the coverage of the murder of George Floyd in the present.

Now we have videos, so we get more intimate and more decentralized images, but the effect of the broadcast of, let's say, the Rodney King beating in 1992 and then the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown killings, and so many others, all the way up to George Floyd and Jacob Blake. The coverage of those events conforms to the premise that journalism is obliged to show abuses of power. And so the coverage of the Birmingham demonstrations in 1963, which were electrifying, where we saw police dogs used against demonstrators, we saw high velocity fire hoses being used as weapons, that coverage which was very important to expanding the Civil Rights movement and sympathy for what African Americans were going through — the same spirit is at work now. The difference is that now there are many more points of entry to large audiences, so that a George Floyd video becomes immense even though (or maybe partly because) it was recorded by amateurs.

The scale of these uprisings is of such magnitude that I have to say, even against the background of what I've described, I'm astonished at how widespread the coverage has been and how receptive in spirit, if not always in detail, it's been to the demands and the activities of Black Lives Matter. So that very quickly we saw it became the big story. Now, of course, there are many reasons why that story spread. I don't have a hypodermic model of why that happens. But very quickly it became clear that this was to be a big story. Anguish, horror, and rage erupted from just beneath the surface. Perhaps the movement of 2020 was also swept along by all the thwarted energy — pent up by the pandemic and quarantine — finding an affirmative outlet. Journalism's attention to Black Lives Matter was immense and surprising. But the outlines were not brand new.

JC: But the fact that mainstream journalism is more and more taking a position, do you think it is good or bad for democracy?

TG: I think that the commitment of mainstream journalism to truth — primarily the truth that is discomforting, uncomfortable, disturbing — that commitment is absolutely essential. Sometimes mainstream journalism goes rather too far in its alignment with the vocabulary or the spirit of the protests, whether it's the #metoo movement or Black Lives Matter or others. But in general I think that it's a step forward to demolish the fantasies about objectivity which were always overrated, always overambitious. All the more so because of the rise of the right-wing propaganda, committed to lying and distortion and falsehood, that took hold of a segment of our population. Then mainstream journalism, obsessed with a need for "balance" and "nonpartisanship," learn how stupid — how distorting — it is to say: "Well, some people say the moon is a rock 240 000 miles from earth and some people say it's made of green cheese." Some have learned, some haven't — not enough.

When the green cheese caucus is so large, it's essential to try to arrive at the truth. Now that doesn't mean you abandon the ideal of fairness. It doesn't mean that you write falsehoods. It doesn't mean that you neglect contrary views. No, it's important to resist the appeals of propaganda. But still and all, when even the aspiration to truth is being trampled thousands of times every day, I think it is a matter of enlightenment conviction to recommit bringing the truth to light.

MS: When I was teaching undergraduates at UC-San Diego, and these are very good students, they were top of their high school classes in California, they did not understand there was a difference between an editorial and a straight news story and a news analysis. For them, it was basically, it's either in the newspaper or it's not in the newspaper. But from inside jour-

nalism, there's a big difference. And newspapers were, you know, advocates of policies and persons and parties for several hundred years. But the rise of a notion of objectivity more or less amounted to "let's separate what we advocate as a news organization in relation to our politics and our citizenship, and what we describe as going on in the world and keeping people up to date with what's going on in the world." That was the first change. And then at some point accelerating quickly in the 1970s there was, as I said earlier, an increase in overt interpretation, or contextualizing of the news. Half or more of each front page these days is interpretation — interpretation is sort of taken for granted as part of the job of journalism. How otherwise could an ordinary reader understand this complicated and quickly moving world of ours?

Within some kind of limits that I can't define, that's good for democracy. I think that the move toward interpretation has been good for creating news that goes deeper and communicates more fully than the flat (and frankly boring) news I read in the 1950s and early 1960s.

JC: Should that be without limits?

MS: You know, I think that that's a question that journalists themselves know is on their agenda. If I were in a decision making role in a news organization, I think I'd have to figure it out. Day by day and moment by moment and situation by situation. I don't have a general ruling.

I do think it's a question for journalists to figure out — without government intervention. There are other issues about the publication of hate speech and the publication of sheer lies that the big online platforms have to deal with every day and I think it would be a public service for them to share publicly how they go about this, how they define the principles by which they make their judgments. I haven't thought through the whole question here where European countries are quite different from us in terms of forbidding hate speech. I mean, at present, it doesn't look like European policies been any more successful than the US government's more "hands off" policy in preventing resurgence of not just hate speech but hate parties.

JC: Okay. All right. Okay. That's pretty much about mainstream journalism in the US. And my next question is of special interest of mine. It's about so many readers of this journal are very interested in the tensions between China and the United States and how it has been increasingly playing out in the realm of speech.

TG: Correct.

JC: We see that journalists are being expelled and technology companies subject to increasing pressures from the State and so on. So do you think we are headed to another Cold War, which is a very hot topic here in China at this moment?

TG: I think it all depends on the decisions of the leadership of the two countries. I think it could go toward a bitter, more polarized Cold War. Probably not military conflict, though perhaps skirmishes at the edges. But I think the situation is also manageable if leadership is wise on both sides. Obviously our current political leadership is the opposite of wise. It is both belligerent and stupid, a toxic combination. Relations will be complicated and difficult but neither the United States nor China is going to go away.

JC:: No.

TG: They're both immense and powerful within different spheres. And they are also, as we all know now, or should know, deeply interdependent.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

TG:: What is an American corporation? What is a Chinese corporation, etc.? My computer came here from China. And I don't know where Skype came from. I don't know who invented Skype. In any event, I think the most likely scenario is one of managed conflict and managed cooperation simultaneously. And wise leadership can contain the antagonisms.

JC: So what role should journalism play in managing this new superpower of confrontation?

TG: Well, I think journalists should do what they should be doing in any case. They should be trying to hold power accountable, they should be trying to explain realities. Journalism in the US anyway, in the West in general and perhaps in China too, is too often imprisoned in events rather than social and institutional developments.

So the very existence of supply chains, so crucial to understanding what's happened in China-US relations over the recent decades, needs to be described and explained. And not just once. Again and again and again because there are illusions. First of all, that China is "stealing our jobs." There's some truth there, but it's exaggerated. There is the illusion that the US must bow down to dictatorship. There is the illusion that the US is golden and China is wicked. All this stuff has to be stopped and the picture needs to be filled out as it evolves. Sometimes Chinese leaders and people will be angry at why the Americans are so interested in the Uighurs and sometimes Americans will be angry because they think Chinese propaganda is undermining our democratic system.

Trump, accused on the basis of much evidence of collaborating with Putin, now conjures a fantasy of millions of fraudulent ballots being deposited by the Chinese government in American mailboxes. This is insane. So all such crazy claims need to be cleared away. But there'll continue to be US-China frictions. There are different ideas about journalism, about Hong Kong, about other matters. That's okay. We'll see what evolves. But I do think journalism can inflame things. We saw that in the early Cold War and in the 1950s very dramatically in both the US and the Soviet Union. But it needn't go that way. It needn't fan the flames of just raw, stupid hatred — and shouldn't.

MS: Well, look, the optimist in me is strong. Look at the news this month. The first woman of color to be on a major party ticket in the history of the country is a sign of progress. I mean, it's more a sign of progress if Biden and Harris get elected and that's yet to be seen. But I think a second four years of a person as ill equipped to lead a constitutional democracy as Mr. Trump could be really disastrous for this country and for the world and certainly for US-China relations. So far as I know Trump still thinks that COVID-19 is a Chinese invention. There was the Eisenhower cabinet officer who said what's good for General Motors is good for the country. Trump seems to think what's good for Mar-A-Lago is good for the country. If he actually thinks about what's good for the country at all.

Trump will pull out all the stops to be reelected. I think this would be dreadful for US-China relations. And that would be very bad for the world. Would there be a new kind of cold war? I think right now it's mostly an economic cold war which is not the same thing as a cold war. Trump's views about the Coronavirus notwithstanding. I don't think fighting the Chinese is as much on his mind as appeasing Russia seems to be.

You know, every time that a journalist is expelled from China, the western news media are horrified. But at the same time, any time physically attacking a reporter is encouraged by the President of the United States, every journalist in the country is also horrified. So when the police enter a newsroom in Hong Kong, it's on the front page of *The New York Times*. Even if it's pure, old fashioned, here's what happened reporting. You have to make a judgment about where in the paper that belongs. And they made a judgment and it was the front page. That's a value judgment. You can't escape value judgments in journalism. And that's what the academic analysis of ideology and ideal of objectivity (including my own) has never fully come to terms with. And now it's in our faces. And somehow we have to come to terms with that.

JC: So my last question would be what can both sociology and the study of news contribute

to the situation?

TG: Well, Sociology is always, I think, called upon to try to clarify the dynamics of societies, to clarify what's at stake in history, which entails trying to see events within a context of processes and institutional power. Parenthetically I think Sociology would be far more successful and influential in America if it were less jargon-ridden and more concerned with accumulating a popular public, which is not technically proficient but which deserves to have a deeper view than simply the hysteria of the moment. So I think Sociology would be all the more effective if it reached out to a larger public.

And to some extent we're seeing this. I mean one of the fascinating things in the Black Lives Matter period is how some social scientists have gotten an important extensive hearing for their explanations of, and debates on, the history of racism in America. The idea of institutional racism, which used to be highly controversial (as counterposed to "prejudice," which was strictly a matter of individual consciousness), is far more acceptable today. You now hear politicians speaking of it. Twenty years ago, it would have been a taboo, left-wing phrase. Sociologists can take some credit for altering the discourse for the good.

JC: And what could the study of news, the journalism studies, could contribute?

TG: It's always important to see how the institutions actually work as opposed to how they say they work and I'm sure this is true in China as it's true in the United States. So if we understand that news doesn't come from nowhere but that it's a product of social decisions, that institutions are at work, that human beings are producing the news, and that the news is not growing on trees, that's enlightening. The details are enlightening.

At the same time, journalism has a serious struggle today because it is itself an embattled institution. It's embattled mostly by commercial pressures, in particular the collapse of the newspaper industry. So, in addition to trying to make mainstream journalism more thorough and smart, journalists also need to create new platforms for reaching people and attempting to explain why we're in this crisis and what might be done about it.

MS: I think what journalism does — various forms of journalism, from the most professionalized objective journalism to advocacy journalism and all the things in between — they are all trying to make sense of information in an incredibly interdependent globalized world.

I keep teaching and keep going back and reading Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion*, which has been pretty heavily attacked in recent years. I mean, he's dead, but so it doesn't matter to him, but various scholars have attacked him for being an elitist, for wanting experts to rule; he never wanted experts to rule. He did say that none of us in a world that has become so complicated can take in and assimilate all the information that bombard us. He was writing long before Twitter. And he felt overwhelmed, overwhelmed by how much information there was. And he noticed members of Congress couldn't absorb it all, let alone the rest of us for whom politics is not a full-time job. And — I think he was wrong about this — but he also said there was a world of small, self-contained communities where people had enough knowledge of everybody else in town, and everything else going on in town, that they could make well informed judgments about what to do.

But he assumed that the problem was *not* the people were stupid. The problem was that the world had become overwhelmingly complex. And that, you know, we have lives to lead, we have jobs to do, we have children to take care of, we have elderly to take care of, we have lots to do. And we can't be spending the entire day reading *The New York Times*, or better still 10 other news outlets, or these days easily 100 other news outlets that that's just not within human capacity. And that's the problem. That's why we have to rely on experts who devote their lives to trying to get a fair handle on some specific small micro domains so that somebody

knows how to do a colonoscopy and somebody else knows how to teach freshmen composition and on and on. And that's why we need journalists, to translate for us to help translate for us. Journalists can't do it all and they won't do all of it. But they do take a remarkable lunge at this unbearably large task and that's why journalism matters so much. We'd like it to be as good as possible. And the world is not about to get less complicated, as we can see.

JC: OK, thank you both. I think that's pretty much all the questions that I want to ask. I would like to thank you for all these very inspiring and enlightening comments you just give, especially for me, a journalism researcher in an authoritarian country, striving to stay optimistic. So I want to really, you know, show my appreciation for your time and your energy.

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Michael Schudson received a B.A. from Swarthmore College and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard. He taught at the University of Chicago from 1976 to 1980 and at the University of California, San Diego from 1980 to 2009. From 2005 on, he split his teaching between UCSD and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, becoming a full-time member of the Columbia faculty in 2009. He is the author of eight books and co-editor of four others concerning the history and sociology of the American news media, advertising, popular culture, Watergate and cultural memory. He is the recipient of a number of honors; he has been a Guggenheim fellow, a resident fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto, a MacArthur Foundation "genius" fellow, and has received honorary degrees from the University of Groningen (Netherlands) and Hong Kong Baptist University. His most recent books are *Journalism: Why It Matters* (Polity, 2020), *The Rise of the Right to Know: Politics and the Culture of Transparency 1945-1975* (Harvard, 2015) and (with C.W. Anderson and Leonard Downie, Jr.), *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2016).