

Power of news media is exaggerated, according to UCSD expert Michael Schudson

July 25, 1995

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POWER OF NEWS MEDIA IS EXAGGERATED, ACCORDING TO UCSD EXPERT

Some say news is simply information, mirroring the world. Others believe it's propaganda, promoting a partisan view.

According to media expert, Michael Schudson, a professor of communication and sociology at the University of California, San Diego, news is its own complex form of culture whose characteristics are often viewed with ambiguity and whose power is often overrated.

"Critics look at the press and see Superman when it's really just Clark Kent," writes Schudson in his recent book, *The Power of News*, a collection of essays and research articles published by Harvard University Press. "The media are not nearly as important as the media, media culture, the talk show culture, and popular reflexes suggest."

In his book, Schudson explores certain myths perpetuated by journalists and critics. He concludes that, contrary to popular belief, the press did not bring about the Spanish- American War or bring down Richard Nixon. He also believes that TV did not decide the Kennedy-Nixon debates or turn the public against the Vietnam War.

So, if the news media are not as all-powerful as they are widely perceived to be, what is the nature of its power?

In Schudson's view, news, by making knowledge public, actually changes the character of knowledge, amplifies it, gives it an official stamp of importance, and allows people to act on that knowledge in new and significant ways. In essence, news becomes a cultural product. However, what connection it has to the political action of readers or viewers, according to Schudson, or how it impacts the political behavior of government officials or other elites is rarely clear.

It may be, Schudson suggests, that news gains power not in its direct impact on audiences but in the belief that the knowledge of citizens alone can, from time to time, be effective.

The Power of News excavates the origins of contemporary journalistic practices, including the interview, the summary lead, the preoccupation with the presidency, and the ironic and detached stance of the reporter toward the political world.

In exploring the role of the news media in the democratic process, Schudson suggests that the news media can help create a more democratic society. What may be needed, he says, is "...a kind of schizophrenia on the part of the news media -- to act as if a classical democracy were within reach and simultaneously to work as if a large, informed and involved electorate were not possible."

Schudson, who received a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" award in 1990, is also the author of several other books on journalism, the mass media, and media culture, including *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*, *Watergate in American Memory*, and *Discovering the News*.

(July 25, 1995)