

UCSD professor receives research grant from the Spencer Foundation of Chicago to study history of the newspaper interview

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UCSD PROFESSOR RESEARCHES HISTORY OF NEWSPAPER INTERVIEW

Michael Schudson, chairman of the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego, has received a \$6,000 grant from the Spencer Foundation of Chicago to study the history of the newspaper interview.

Schudson's interest in the newspaper interview was the result of a book he wrote on the history of American newspapers entitled "Discovering the News." "After I finished the book, I found some questions about the history of American journalism that continued to intrigue me," said Schudson.

Schudson noticed that a variety of information-gathering occupations arose at roughly the same time in the mid-19th century. These included newspaper reporters, photographers, credit reporters such as Dun and Bradstreet, police detectives and private detectives, all of whom appeared during the 1830s to 1860s.

"There was a real flourishing of people asking questions in occupations that had not existed before," said Schudson. "I was interested to see whether the interview, which is the mainstay of the newspaper today, had always existed. I found it hadn't."

According to Schudson, before the mid- to late-19th century, interviews were not found in newspapers. If reporters asked a president questions, for example, it was never reported publicly as such in the newspaper.

"The entire text of a presidential speech was printed and there was a news story that said here's what happened in Congress today, but no one took the occasion to highlight the important points," Schudson said. Using the same example, Schudson noted that by 1880 and 1890 there was some discussion of how Congress reacted to this speech. "The summary lead that we take for granted today didn't appear until about the 20th century," he added.

"It's interesting to explore what made this new form popular -- what made it seem natural for reporters to try out and for readers to accept," Schudson said.

Schudson views the newspaper interview as a genre of literature, similar to the novel. Novels did not appear before the late 18th century.

"I'm interested in the history surrounding the newspaper interview, what made it arrive when it did and what that has to say about society at that time," Schudson said. "I think one aspect involved privacy. The earliest newspaper interview was regarded as an invasion of privacy. Europeans were much slower to accept it than Americans. At the turn of the century Europeans thought interviews were an American abomination."

In pursuing his research, Schudson will visit libraries in Boston and Chicago, which contain the papers of famous turn of the century journalists. "I'll be looking at old newspapers to see when the interview form appeared and how it stayed," Schudson said. He also plans to look at early journalism textbooks to see how writers were first instructed to be reporters.

The Spencer Foundation was founded in 1968 by the late Lyle Spencer who was founder and president of Science Research Associates, an educational publishing firm that is now a subsidiary of IBM.

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