

The Monitorial Citizen in the “Democratic Recession”

Abstract: The success of populist candidates and rhetoric, coupled with a perceived degradation in political discourse, have raised concerns over fraying democratic institutions even in stable wealthy democracies. These developments make particularly relevant the modest, grounded liberalism developed in Michael Schudson's work, with its focus on the possibilities of actually existing democracy. They also offer a moment to ask what are the conditions and limits of the optimism that characterizes much of that work. This essay reviews the analytical and normative framework for understanding contemporary democracy Schudson develops, centered on the notion of monitorial citizenship elaborated in *The Good Citizen* and *The Rise of the Right To Know*. I read this work against the grain to suggest that it represents a fusion of classically liberal and “critical cultural” perspectives. I draw attention to the messy but more or less reasonable public sphere that emerges in the episodes Schudson visits, underwritten by a quality of *institutional coherence* grounded in strong democratic norms governing elite behavior. And I suggest that those conditions have depended on a tenuous historical balance between political consensus, on one hand, and the opening up of politics and public life Schudson chronicles so well.

Keywords: journalism, democratic institutions, public sphere, civil society

Introduction

The last decade has seen mounting concern in academic and policy circles over a global “democratic recession” marked by resurgent authoritarianism in the developing world and an erosion of the liberal democratic order even in wealthy Western nations. Worrying signs of the latter trend include, for instance, the growing popularity of right-wing nationalist parties, the wider political crisis in the eurozone, nearly a decade of effective government paralysis in the United States — and of course dramatic recent events like the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the unexpected outcome of the US presidential race. Analyses of “de-democratization” and “illiberal democracy” run from fairly black-and-white defenses of liberal republican values (Diamond 2015; Zakaria 1997, 2016) to indictments of neoliberal thought and policy (Brown 2006; Streeck 2014). Fraser (2015) reads the “crisis of democracy” as a version of Habermas’ “legitimation crisis” expressing the particular political contradictions of financialized capitalism.

At the center of these concerns is a perceived breakdown, or at least a loss of cohesion, in the democratic public sphere as an effective check on political and economic power, and as a vehicle for identifying public concerns and building consensus around policy responses. Two related strands can be detected here. One is the worry that facts and expertise enjoy declining purchase in public discourse — that, in the starkest terms, we have entered a “post-fact” or “post-truth” age (e.g. Drezner 2016; Viner 2016). As many have noted, this widespread formulation is both imprecise and ahistorical. Wild claims and outlandish conspiracies are nothing new in politics, certainly not American politics, and we cannot conclude from the outcome of the 2016 presidential race or any other vote that the extraordinary degree of fact-checking and “accountability reporting” practiced today make no difference (Mantzaris 2016). At the same time, it seems fair to say that widespread assumptions about how facts normally matter in the politics of open societies have been challenged. The Trump campaign’s extravagant disregard for established facts, carried over into the new administration, highlights the fragility of the conventions of reasonable public speech. It gives new urgency to the question of how political discourse adapts to a media ecosystem with few effective gatekeepers. “Trump understands the new ecosystem, in which facts and truth don’t matter,” Barack Obama was reported to say in the wake of the election (Remnick 2016).

A second strand concerns the perceived erosion of informal democratic norms governing public conduct, especially that of political elites. This encompasses any number of self-imposed obligations or restraints on political rhetoric and action, from acknowledging the legitimacy of opposing candidates, for instance, to procedural norms that have guided releasing financial records, managing conflicts of interest, selecting nominees for important posts, and so on. Scholars define informal norms and institutions in different ways (Azari & Smith 2012) and it is perhaps too easy to read in any behavior we don’t like a grave violation of a cherished norm. Still, the extraordinary volume of public worry about democratic norms provoked by Trump’s victory underscores the essential point that “the rule of law” is in some ways a misnomer: “what sustains democracy is not simply legal safeguards and rules, but norms and practices — democratic behavior” (Zakaria 2016). Established informal norms rely on voluntary observance, encouraged by sanctions that are more often assumed than tested. This gives their erosion a frighteningly self-reinforcing character, like the disruption of an ecological equilibrium. Successfully defying the rules of political gravity — for instance, by not releasing tax returns as a presidential candidate — invites others to do the same. As political scientist Brendan Nyhan

has warned, “the incentives to normalize are very strong. ... ultimately there must be a political cost to breaching these norms or they will continue to be breached.”¹

These two strands are closely related. Both draw our attention to institutional practice and authority. Both center on the question of accountability: Observing norms of democratic conduct or factual discourse means acting as if their violation has consequences. Ideally, it means affirming that their violation *should* have consequences, thus reproducing the norm. That the problem of accountability for untruthful speech or illiberal behavior should be so pronounced today presents an important puzzle. As Michael Schudson has argued so convincingly in the US case, citizens in wealthy democracies have easier access to more and better information about their government and about most issues of public interest than at any time in history. Despite the economic crisis in the news industry and the worrying decline of local reporting, journalism by many measures has never been better — more probing, more comprehensive, more issue-focused, more critical — than it is today (Fink & Schudson 2013; Schudson 2008a, 2013, 2015). And the contemporary public sphere includes an unprecedentedly deep array of civic actors and institutions that exist to promote different kinds of public accountability. This amounts to a new “form of democracy, not only in the United States but elsewhere around the world, in which government is held accountable not just at the polling place on election day but continuously” (Schudson 2015, 25).

This puzzle makes this an ideal moment to consider broadly Schudson’s arguments about the actual workings of the liberal public sphere. His work has long focused on the domain of democratic values, norms, and institutions drawing so much attention at the moment. This essay tries to illuminate the basic tenets and requirements of the modest, grounded liberalism that emerges in Schudson’s work, especially as developed in *The Good Citizen* and *The Rise of the Right to Know*. His approach rejects idealized textbook notions of the democratic public sphere in favor of close attention to the messy and invariably disappointing realities of journalism and political discourse. But it also seems to validate the faith that a commitment to broad liberal values like openness and equality yields meaningful political progress. The episodes Schudson investigates to understand shifts in democratic life in the United States, especially over the last half-century, evoke a public that is far from rational but still mostly reasonable. The mediated, institutionally textured public sphere at work in these episodes has all of the familiar flaws — and yet it reliably seems to provide the measure of accountability required for substantive engagement with public questions. It is important to ask clearly what circumstances that kind of institutional coherence has depended on, and how those circumstances may have shifted in recent decades.

Political culture and the public sphere

Schudson’s approach to the possibilities and limits of the democratic public sphere comes through most clearly in *The Good Citizen*, a study of the remarkably variable ideals of citizenship that mark US history. He frames the argument in part as a response to “post-liberal” critics “disenchanted with the language and institutions of liberalism,” and especially with its emphasis on individual rights over more communitarian or deliberative visions of democracy (1998, 367n17). But the book is just as much a critique of stodgy liberal originalism, and of idealized academic renderings of the democratic public sphere. As Calhoun (2011, 320) notes, it offers a caution against “golden age concepts” implicit in Habermas’ emphasis on rational-critical debate among citizens gathered as equals. More than that, though, the book’s relentless

historicizing of liberal values and evaluative frameworks shares something with more “critical cultural” scholarship. It is perhaps not unfair to see what Schudson elsewhere calls “a tincture of Foucault” (2008a, 111) in his own argument.²

The backbone of that argument is to divide American history into four eras marked by fundamental shifts in the understanding and practice of democracy. Each era Schudson identifies features distinct centers of political authority, ideals of citizenship, and electoral rules of the road, both written and unwritten. The colonial period and early republic were characterized by a fairly aristocratic “politics of assent.” Political authority was closely tied to social position, with local gentry standing for office, often unopposed, on the basis of personal virtue and without making promises or soliciting votes. In the first decades of the 19th century, a rising “egalitarian ethos” in American social life and a wave of electoral reforms (increasing the number of popularly elected offices and removing property restrictions on the franchise) gave rise to mass-based political parties and ushered in what Schudson calls the “politics of affiliation.” In this period movements and organizations increasingly provided the structure previously supplied by social hierarchy. Jacksonian democracy brought genuine political competition marked by jubilant campaigns and vigorous public participation, but was rooted in ethnic and religious loyalties and fueled by corruption, clientelism, and a deeply partisan press. Schudson calls this the “large, uncomfortable fact” of the era: “The more politics could be understood as team sport and the rivalry of social groups, the more enthusiastically people participated in the public sphere, but the less elevated the substance of politics” (1998, 146).

The Progressive Era brought a second wave of electoral and political reforms, culminating in universal suffrage, that sought to rationalize politics by reining in the power of political parties. Tied to social changes that accompanied industrialization and urbanization, as well as to a growing popular reverence for scientific inquiry, this transformation yielded the “informed citizen” ideal still celebrated by civics texts. (This is also, importantly, still the default view of most professional journalists, who take for granted a “rational-choice, civic-duty, anti-party version of the voter at the polling place”; Schudson 2008a, 75; Gans 2003). State and federal reforms all but eliminated the patronage system, curbed electioneering, and took election day out of the hands of the parties, producing “a new model citizenship that made it both more difficult and less interesting to be a ‘good citizen’” (1998, 147). In Schudson’s view the unrealistic expectations attached to this “purification” of citizenship are at the center of the so-called Lippmann-Dewey debate, and of our continuing difficulty imagining a place for experts and expertise in democratic life.

Finally, in the wake of the civil rights movement the textbook ideal of the reasoning, information-seeking voter has been partly supplanted, in practice if not yet in democratic rhetoric, by a new model centered on the “rights-bearing citizen.” At the heart of this transformation, which dovetailed with wider cultural and political shifts of the 1960s, Schudson sees a “growing inclination of people and groups to define politics in terms of rights, a growing willingness of the federal government to enforce individuals’ claims to constitutional rights, and a widening of the domain of ‘politics’ propelled by rights-consciousness” (1998, 242). He suggests that the virtues of rights-conscious politics in which progress is secured through the courts as often as the legislature have not been fully appreciated. Though criticized as excessively individualistic and insufficiently deliberative – even as a kind of evacuation of the public sphere (Carey 1995) — this emerging practice of citizenship is in his view well-suited to a moment when politics are more pervasive, and the public sphere more open, than ever before.

The historical scheme in *The Good Citizen* produces a deliberate paradox. An argument running through the book is that these very different democratic eras each had their own flaws and virtues, and that historical norms of citizenship or journalism or campaigning can only be appreciated in light of “the complex coherence of a society at a given time” (1998, 9). Different eras can’t be compared; they are in some sense incommensurable, Schudson suggests, closing with an admonition not to “beat ourselves with the stick of the past” (1998, 314). At the same time, though, and remarkably for an academic study, the book makes a serious effort to establish whether things are getting better or worse. Schudson insists that we recognize all of the ways in which both the formal machinery of politics and the lived experience of civic life have become more democratic: fairer, less deferential, more critical, and vastly more inclusive. By the standards of our own moment — the only vantage available to us — “progress toward genuine inclusion in the past half-century has been extraordinary” (1998, 313).

As noted, this fairly upbeat history can be read as a defense of what Schudson calls the “universalistic values” of liberal thought. But this is only to the extent that these constantly reformulated and reinterpreted values become engines of dissent and critique, the basis for claims by “groups that demonstrate existing liberalism to have been more narrowly constructed in fact than in theory” (1998, 367n17). Schudson clearly agrees with Carey (1995, 378) that terms like democracy, the public, and the press “are historically variable even as they define one another in mutual relief.” He simply rejects Carey’s declinist narrative in favor of a more textured, historical view of the evolving public sphere — one that accommodates not just face-to-face conversation but also social movements and issue groups and position papers and class-action lawsuits.

More precisely, *The Good Citizen* is an argument for tuning our democratic rhetoric and ideals to appreciate the virtues of representative democracy buttressed by a vibrant institutional landscape of academic experts, think tanks, interest groups, professional associations, watchdog groups, and so on. As Schudson avers elsewhere, “representative democracy is not a ‘second best’ solution we reluctantly resort to when the country’s population grows too large. Representation creates a better system of governance — more honest, fair, and trustworthy — than direct democracy” (2008a, 5). This is a central thread in his recurring defense of Walter Lippman against critics, like James Carey, who charge him with proposing a kind of democracy without citizens. Elections and not experts are what take the public out of day-to-day governance, Schudson argues; “Lippmann understood and accepted this reality, while Carey did not” (2008b, 1033).

However, it is easy to overlook how much Schudson’s approach shares with critics like Carey and John Dewey — most fundamentally, a view of the political as a sphere of contestation over shifting values, rather than mainly a series of technical or administrative challenges. The rights-conscious politics defined and defended in *The Good Citizen* consists in the emergence of entirely new areas of public concern, as well as new forms of political expression and experience. Lippmann gives us few tools to think about, say, the rise of “marriage equality” as a prominent political question. Schudson’s “widening web of citizenship” depends on the kind of engaged and expressive publics Dewey (1927) imagines in *The Public and Its Problems*. It depends on meaningful public communication, not just accurate information.

The monitorial citizen and monitory democracy

A virtue of Schudson's approach is to emphasize that different historical ideals of citizenship remain alive in the palimpsest of democratic rhetoric and practice. He treats these as resources to draw on selectively in thinking about what sort of democracy we can reasonably aspire to. Thus, the norm that citizens should be informed about public issues and seek to make sound political choices has obvious value, to the extent it can be realized. "How much of the obligation to be knowledgeable about politics can people relinquish without doing violence to their democratic souls?" Schudson asks (1998, 311). This is the genesis of the more modest standard he proposes, of the "monitorial citizen" who "engages in environmental surveillance rather than information-gathering" (1998, 312). Monitorial citizens may be more or less informed about particular issues but are also busy with their own lives. When they find time to read the news they may not read past the headlines. At the same time, they are alert and ready to respond — on election day and in other ways — to news that affects their lives or concerns an issue they care about.

This ideal directly addresses the problem of "omnicompetence" identified by Lippmann. "There must be some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands of self-government," Schudson argues (1998, 310). But, crucially, the monitorial citizen is also compatible with the possibility of various forms of democratic action by citizens in a moment when the personal has become political. It is compatible with a variegated institutional landscape in which the lines between politicians, journalists, experts, and everyday citizens aren't always clear — a world of bloggers and campaigning lawyers and activist academics and other "civic spark plugs." Again, this argument for expertise has a different inflection than the one presented in *Public Opinion*. Lippmann's proposed "Bureaus of Intelligence" exist to advise policymakers; he barely hints that their work may also, incidentally, be used to inform and improve journalism (Lippmann 1922; Schudson 2008b). In contrast, Schudson wants us to recognize the ways that expertise must, and already does, drive action and argument in an uneven but vibrant civil sphere in which an increasingly sophisticated journalism plays a vital role.³

Schudson develops this perspective in *The Rise of the Right to Know* with an extended discussion of contemporary democratic theory, in particular the concept of "monitory democracy" advanced by theorist John Keane. The central idea is that representation in contemporary representative democracies no longer takes place only or even mainly through parties and elections, which "have been substantially supplemented (but not replaced) with multiple forms of representing the public and holding governments accountable" (2015, 230). Today, avenues by which citizens monitor and influence their leaders beyond the voting booth include the press as well as civil society groups, activists like Ralph Nader, whistleblowers like Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden, and an array of "governmental self-monitoring mechanisms" built into the administrative state over the last half-century. In Schudson's view, these "new mechanisms of representation ... allow continuous, rather than episodic, representation; popularly generated rather than party-controlled representation; and many platforms for entrepreneurial democratic action" (2015, 241).

This argument dovetails with the "widening web of citizenship" chronicled in *The Good Citizen*. Monitory democracy is grounded in rights-consciousness — in the "judicialization of politics" and the "politicization of everyday life" (2015, 231, 251). In highlighting the workings of an active institutional layer for monitoring power both within and beyond government, it suggests that the state and civil society intertwine in ways not recognized by classic, Habermasian views of the public sphere. This reliable institutional layer operates in parallel to the fourth estate but also augments it, and has changed the nature of journalistic work in basic ways: "There is a new environment of public information produced by government agencies,

university researchers, nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, bloggers, and many others, all contributing to a sea of information that the well educated reporter navigates” (2015, 255).

The idea of monitorial democracy asks us to imagine an institutionally textured public sphere marked by uneven participation by citizens (usually, organized groups of citizens) of varied levels of interest and ability. It explicitly rejects what Schudson calls “the Enlightenment hope for a ‘rational democratic consensus’” (2015, 235). That said, monitorial democracy also suggests a basic measure of reasonableness in the public sphere — and specifically, a reasonable expectation of accountability based in more or less coherent exchange among state and civil actors. This expectation comes through in the slogan Schudson offers to capture the spirit of monitorial democracy, borrowed from the New York City Transit Authority: “If you see something, say something.” He observes that “in this newly evolving, publicly monitored democracy... there are more venues for seeing, there are more opportunities for saying” (2015, 241). The presumption is that seeing and saying will, much or most of the time, lead to some kind of meaningful public doing.

This quality of institutional coherence does not demand rational-critical discourse. But it does require — by Schudson’s own account, I think — sufficient commitment to a common network of institutional authorities, to observing norms of civility (or its appearance), and to the imagined ideal of a reasoning public, for political debate to be meaningfully shaped by expert opinion and the available evidence.

What does good-enough public reason require?

It is important not to overstate the case. Schudson makes a clear argument for tempering our expectations of democratic institutions and governance. “We do not live in a perfect world, nor will we. The effort to invent and institutionalize truth-telling and independent judgment may be as good as it gets,” he writes in the introduction to a recent collection (2008a, 2). He is the first to note that the redemptive moments in American history, like the victories of civil rights movement, show justice slow in arriving and incomplete when it does. He endorses the view of Keane and others who argue that the virtue of democracy lies not in the results it produces but rather in the opportunity for revision and reconsideration. As he writes, “My contention is not necessarily that democracy overall is improving but that the ways we assess democracy need to change” (2015, 241).

In pressing for a more modest and nuanced view of how democracies work, however, Schudson also consistently highlights the remarkable possibilities of the actually existing public sphere. The episodes he investigates are ones in which historical contingency, strategic work by political actors, and the coordinating and clarifying work of the press and other public and civic institutions come together to produce substantial political achievements. Thus, for instance, Schudson shows how the civil rights movement took advantage of obscure Supreme Court rulings which made litigation a powerful political lever for existing groups like the NAACP and the ACLU. Victories like the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were achieved only gradually and at tremendous cost, including loss of life. But they also showed movement actors and congressional reformers using the media and the courts to make a broad, public, evidence-based case demonstrating the “inequality and inhumanity” of segregation (1998, 290).

The extended “rights revolution” documented in *The Good Citizen* is not driven by rational-critical debate among citizens gathered as equals. Because its meaning became clear only in hindsight, Schudson uses the term “silent New Deal” to refer to a wave of legislation

beginning in the mid-1960s that asserted federal authority to define and protect individual rights in the home, the school, and the workplace, “spurring a federalization of national consciousness and a striking expansion of the arenas that could be authentically understood as ‘political’” (1998, 265). But this is still very much a fact-based revolution. New laws defending against ills from discrimination and domestic abuse to dangerous products or workplaces relied on research-driven arguments made by advocates in the press, the courts, and congressional hearing rooms. The civic actors and groups Schudson wants to draw our attention to — like Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen, a favorite example — succeed precisely by linking the academic, legal, policy, and political worlds, translating scientific research into forms that will persuade in the nightly news or on Capitol Hill.

Similarly, something like a good-enough public reason emerges in the political developments that anchor the emerging “culture of transparency” detailed in *The Rise of the Right to Know*. Schudson quickly dispels the notion that any kind of broad public outcry led to new accountability mechanisms like the Freedom of Information Act, environmental impact statements, and consumer product labeling rules. Reforms had more to do with competition between congressional factions, and between Congress and the executive branch, than with any explicit transparency agenda. (Public engagement often followed, as legislation opened up new spheres of action for civil society groups to exploit.) At the same time, Schudson’s narrative asserts a broad historical logic. He emphasizes that taken together these new openness mechanisms represented a needed democratic corrective — a response by Congress, aided by the press, to the rise of the national security state. The reforms matched the wider zeitgeist, reflecting and reproducing “a profound cultural change” at work in the postwar United States (2015, 21). And the maneuverings that finally produced measures like FOIA all feature striking examples of productive, publicly-minded exchange across party lines and between state and civil actors.

Another way to say this is that the histories Schudson explores as well as the conceptual model he advances exhibit what, writing in another context, he calls “norms of public reasonableness” (2008, 105). He argues that “democratic talk,” unlike some spirited coffeeshop discussions, is highly constrained: civil, rule-governed, and focused on solving problems. A public problem-solving conversation demands reasonableness in the sense that participants commit in good faith to treat one another as legitimate, to listen seriously to reasonable arguments, and to offer reasons for their own arguments. It also demands that participants draw on a common universe of news and public information — “the newspaper, the laws, the public world” (2008, 103).

Norms of public reasonableness undergird the institutional coherence that, I would argue, becomes a crucial measure of monitory democracy. In a useful recent paper, Azari and Smith (2012, 40) highlight the vital role that informal institutions, defined as unwritten rules reflecting “a collective expectation of right conduct,” play even in stable “advanced” democracies. These informal norms complement formal institutions, they argue, by filling out gaps in the written rules or coordinating activity in areas where multiple sets of formal rules apply. Because such informal norms often work to make political life “smoother” they tend to “embody and reconcile core democratic concerns” (2012, 29); that is, they reflect the different ways we have worked out the tension between competing democratic values, such as empowering majorities while also protecting minority views, promoting political consensus, and so on. This is of course consonant with Schudson’s view of how historically shifting public values and norms impart profoundly different meanings to formal institutional arrangements.

Again, to say monitorial democracy places a premium on institutional coherence is not to say it requires dispassionate scientific debate (or what we imagine as scientific debate). It is only to highlight that the ability of independent experts or public-interest watchdogs to make policy-relevant arguments depends acutely on prevailing political norms — and on the wider media-political environment that shapes those norms. Monitorial democracy draws attention to the paradoxical virtues of establishment discourse, a recurring theme in Schudson's work. A coherent media-political establishment spanning a universe of "legitimate" sources of news and opinion and expertise operates to set political priorities and shape a public agenda. Establishment discourse also necessarily excludes and marginalizes, of course. However, this narrowness itself may offer a focal point for oppositional views and, paradoxically, heighten the impact of arguments that penetrate the establishment. Not unlike a scientific paradigm in Kuhn's (2012) view, epistemic rigidity or closure offers a backdrop against which anomalies stand out all the more sharply.

This quality of institutional coherence grounded in norms of public reasonableness underlies many of Schudson's most interesting and counterintuitive arguments. For instance, their normative commitment to make reasonable public arguments is what allows him to treat think tanks and watchdog groups and even "organizations that gather facts in pursuit of partisan objectives" as a version of Lippmann's "political observatories," rather than as essentially private interests (2008, 9; 2010). (Obviously a spectrum exists here; a group like the Tobacco Institute presumably would not qualify.) This perspective also leads him to defend oft-criticized features of the press, such as its focus on events over issues, its "anti-political cynicism," and its "morbid fascination" with conflict (2008, 62). In Schudson's view these tendencies balance journalism's (also necessary) dependence on official sources and proximity to power; the magnetic pull of conflict and sensation gives the profession its "recurrent anarchic potential" (2008, 56) by helping to introduce new problems and voices into the news. Schudson recognizes the ideological fetters of mainstream journalism but also celebrates what Hallin (1989) calls the "sphere of legitimate controversy" — usually a peg for academic critiques of the press — as providing a space for the routine conduct of politics. As he writes,

Under normal circumstances, our lives are both enriched and complicated by dissent and conflict. Under normal circumstances, dissent and conflict enhance and express the nation's democratic aspirations rather than undermine their possibility.... Under normal circumstances, journalists serve society by adhering to their professional ideals and not by worrying too much over how they might assuage the hurts of their communities. (2008, 86)

Conclusion

Whether what count as "normal circumstances" in the United States or other liberal democracies are changing in some basic way will be clearer in hindsight. The most vivid fears about the significance of the US election, for instance, may turn out to be overstated. The new administration is deeply unpopular, and a major political or electoral setback would offer some reassurance that violating established democratic norms carries political costs. Perhaps the clearest guiding principle in Schudson's work is to take the long view.

However, any serious discussion of the historical and normative framework Schudson develops has to consider whether its most urgent contribution today is to highlight underlying political conditions that are now eroding. The rich institutional landscape that anchors monitorial

democracy in the United States took shape in the second half of the 20th century in a very different media-political environment, even as it helped to transform that environment. The changes that produced a vastly more open, inclusive, and critical public world drew on the coherence of the very institutions which were being opened up — on the agenda-setting authority of the gatekeeping media, and on norms of cooperation and civility rooted at least partly in the prerogatives and culture of a more exclusive political class.

This is, emphatically, not to wish to roll back the clock to the “comity” of governing elites even more tightly circumscribed by race, class, and gender than today’s, or to an appearance of political consensus based on a false image of “mainstream” America and a much narrower view of politics. It is only to highlight the familiar long-term trends that are part and parcel of the opening up of public life Schudson chronicles: the fragmentation and politicization of the news media, rising polarization in Congress and the electorate, and declining levels of public trust in the press and most institutions other than the military. How we view these trends turns unavoidably on difficult judgments of degree. As Schudson observes, midcentury America was arguably too trusting of government, the church, business, and so on; still, societies “cannot long endure without basic social trust” (1998, 301). And if democracies need an unlovable press, it is also true that journalists need a measure of love (or at least respect) to do democratic work.

This tension between openness and coherence has of course only been sharpened by changes in what Schudson calls “the whole ‘information ecology’ of political and social life” (2008a, 7), which affords a richer, more responsive journalism and entirely new forms of critical discourse and political engagement, but also make it easier to spread dangerous falsehoods, to seek out friendly views, or to avoid the news altogether. The framework of monitorial democracy suggests a particular formulation of these well-understood paradoxes: our fragmented media ecosystem makes *monitoring* abundant but *accountability* scarce. The monitorial work of political fact checkers, journalists who specialize in holding politicians to account for false claims, offers a good illustration. Their deeply researched, heavily annotated style of reporting — truly a new kind of “political observatory” — would be impossible outside the contemporary information environment, but also becomes less consequential in that environment (Graves 2016).

More than that, the work of fact-checkers demonstrates how public facts, like scientific facts, depend on institutional coherence — on exchange governed by norms of civility and reasonableness and drawing on a common range of trusted institutional authorities (Shapin 1994). Different information environments favor different kind of knowledge. One provocative recent analysis (Davies 2017) argues that statistics and statistical discourse have been one of the “pillars of liberalism” — a typically public, authoritative kind of data which, though always problematic, is historically tied to the state and to notions of public welfare and “national progress.” National statistics and the institutional regimes they embody are being displaced by the vast new sphere of essentially private data generated by digital communications, “an entirely new kind of knowledge, accompanied by a new mode of expertise.” As has been widely observed, the most serious concern raised by figures like Trump may not be misinformation itself, but rather a corrosive disregard for the habits and institutions of evidence-based discourse in general.

How does the monitorial citizen fare in an environment of declining institutional coherence? It is too tempting to speculate by cherry-picking episodes from the past — to wonder how the environmental and consumer movements of the 1970s would have succeeded in today’s media ecosystem, say, or if a three-network world would promote greater consensus around the

facts of climate change today. In his post-election interview (Remnick 2016), President Obama pointed to the Clean Air Act as a product of policy debates anchored by agreed-upon science: “So you’d argue about means, but there was a baseline of facts that we could all work off of. And now we just don’t have that.” Such ahistorical comparisons obscure the fact that coherent public discourse leading to sensible policy is rare in any era. Still: in a moment of widening concern about liberal norms and institutions, Schudson’s nuanced histories of democratic culture invite much closer attention to the dynamics of public accountability needed to sustain even modestly reasonable discourse — and without which monitorial democracy becomes a hollow concept.

¹ Interviewed in Clare Foran, ““An Erosion of Democratic Norms in America,”” *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/donald-trump-democratic-norms/508469/>.

² Here Schudson considers Foucault’s term “power/knowledge” in order to reject critiques of expertise based on the strong version of the argument that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge. At the same time, though, here and elsewhere he accepts the unifying premise that separating power and knowledge is always problematic, even in areas we imagine as “technical.” The fact that expertise is “socially compromised or socially constructed” (2008, 116) does not mean we cannot assess it in terms of truth, utility, independence, and so on.

³ Schudson has noted that in the earlier *Liberty and the News* Lippmann had a more hopeful view of journalism than in *Public Opinion*, and endorsed the idea of expert “political observatories” to inform the news and public discussion (1998, 213; 2010).

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