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Classic Books Revisited

The Four Theories of the Press Four and a Half Decades Later: a retrospective

Four Theories of the Press

FREDERICK SIEBERT, THEODORE PETERSON, and
WILBUR SCHRAMM

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956

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It seems that this formidable little book will never die. It shows no signs of even fading away. Why is this? It is certainly not due to lack of criticism for its ethnocentric perspectives, its inconsistent structure, its questionable typology and its problematic assumptions. I personally have never seen a book in the communications field that has been used so consistently in classes in spite of its resumé nature and lack of analytical insights. And this is not because these three distinguished authors were incapable of deeper probing, but simply because it is doubtful that when they did their essays they had a book in mind.

Maybe that's the way to do a book. Keep it short. Keep it simple. Keep it descriptive. Keep it neatly organized. Label the main parts with memorable names. Economy in words, thought, and price (be sure it's in paperback): maybe that's the secret formula.

And, oh yes: give it a good, clear title that is riding the waves of popularity at the time of publication. *Four!* Now that's a good number, easy to remember and implying more sophistication than simply *three* or *two*. But not too many for students (or faculty) to remember.

In addition: the book had a great selling point at the time. Its title included the magic word "theories". Faculty and students actually swooned over the word in those days. It was a term that implied scholarship, intellectual content and significant conceptualization. Press

theory was a big thing, especially in graduate classes, at the time. "Four Systems of the Press" would not do. "Four Perspectives on the Press" would not do. But, "theories", yes, by all means.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that the book has no substantive or catalytic value. Indeed it does. But during the period of its publication it was only one of many books with significance in our field. It provided an easily discussed typology of press–government relationships that was absent at the time in a simplified and memorable form.

Students liked it. They could gain a brief historical and ideological view of authoritarianism, libertarianism, Marxism, and social responsibility. And they could, with the exception of the fourth "theory", give representative countries for each one. The US, of course, was libertarian. A country like Spain (at the time) was authoritarian. Countries like China or the USSR were Marxist. So simple. So neat.

Simple, in spite of the fact that Marxist Country #1 was different from Marxist Country #2. But such subtleties were of no importance to Peterson, Siebert and Schramm. With "social responsibility" it was a little more difficult. The parameters of this one were fuzzy and abstract. But we were told that the US was at least developing (from libertarianism) to social responsibility.

Evidently the Marxist press was irresponsible to its society. Ditto for the authoritarian press systems. Ditto for the American and other libertarian press systems. At least this social responsibility theory, although extremely ephemeral, served as a good catalyst for discussion in hundreds of classes. And there was neither real need nor time in class to dig be-

neath these frayed labels and analyze their complexity.

I clearly recall back in 1974 in my *Imperative of Freedom*, where I dealt at some length with *Four Theories*, that I was generally considered something of an annoyance, poking my nose into a sacred text. I was especially bothered by the vagueness of the “social responsibility” theory, and the fact that it was not parallel to the other three. But beyond this difficulty, I foresaw authoritarians of varying stripes using the social responsibility theory to justify their forays into press control. Was my concern unwarranted? I think not.

Look at the public journalists in the US and the growing criticism of an “irresponsible” press. Look at the meritocratic and paternalistic governments of Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. Look at the socialist states of Vietnam, China and Cuba. Look at the theocratic states such as Iran and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. Look at the paternalistic Arab kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia. Look at the unstable states in most of Africa. Their strict, often draconian, press control is always justified by dragging out the concept of “social responsibility”. The spirit of communitarianism is flourishing, even now in the US, and social stability, harmony, cooperation and community are fast replacing the older spirit of individualism and contention.

The liberalism of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thinkers such as Locke, Voltaire and J. S. Mill is being replaced by the neoliberalism of the American communitarians, the French and German deconstructionists, and critical theorists. The problem: how to *make* the press responsible to its society. Perhaps we are “advancing” toward Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s “social responsibility” theory.

In the US, academics like James Carey, Cliff Christians, John Nerone, Ed Lambeth and Ted Glasser are adding their voices to a host of others who are proposing a more responsible and democratic press system. The Pew Foundation, for one, has supported the reform and democratizing of the press. The Hutchins Commission, back in 1947, probably provided the greatest impetus to such thinking, and it is now

accelerating—not only in the US but also in varied spots around the world.

Four Theories has been a great educational catalyst for thought in this area of concern. It has spawned innumerable debates and discussions about national media systems. Perhaps most importantly, it has had an impact on myriads of students—future journalists—in one way or another since the mid twentieth century. It has shaped the thought of students (and faculty) and has prompted many of them to dig deeper into philosophical and political aspects of the press and society.

So, in spite of the flaws that many critics have pointed out and are still pointing out, this little book has a secure place in the literature of journalism. It is a well-written, concise, educational primer for those students and faculty who desire simple, highly structured discourse in a day when few people want to delve into the complexities and intricacies of media, politics and society.

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When you’d ask Ted Peterson, the last surviving author of *Four Theories of the Press*, how the book had come to be written, his answer was simple and direct: “By accident.” Wilbur Schramm had been working on a grant from the National Council of Churches, and he had some money left. He ran into Peterson, then a graduate student and instructor, at the water cooler in Greg Hall and invited him to write a chapter. They went to Fred Siebert’s office and mapped out the book, divvying up the chapters, and that was that—they didn’t meet on it again until the book was drafted.

Each author wrote his contribution out of stuff already in the works. Siebert cribbed his two chapters from his recently finished *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776*. Schramm’s sketch of the Soviet communist theory came from his work on psychological warfare in Korea, done for a branch of the federal government. Peterson’s chapter on social responsibility theory, in my opinion the best and most useful part of the book, came from his teaching

and engagement with the Hutchins Commission for another Schramm collaboration, *Responsibility in Mass Communications*. This was published the following year.

Would that all books come together so happily!

Would that all books enjoy such success!

Four Theories remains the all-time nonfiction bestseller for the University of Illinois Press (the fiction bestseller is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), with sales in six figures. Long after scholars in the field had grown suspicious, the book continued to sell well; surprisingly, it got a second wind from the collapse of the Soviet bloc, was translated into Russian and is being used in Eastern Europe. Despite sporadic schemes to do so, the authors and their successors never produced a revised edition.

It's easy to see why the book was initially successful. It's short, it's readable, it's easily plugged into a course that belongs in every j-school curriculum, and it talks confidently about big issues. But the book is so much a creature of its times that it's hard to explain why it continues to be successful long after those times have passed, and why it's never been replaced. I've wrestled tiresomely and unsuccessfully over the years with this problem.

I inherited Illinois's "Four Theories" course, "Mass Communication in Democratic Society", in 1983. Coming from outside the field of journalism and communications research, I had no familiarity with the traditions that had produced *Four Theories*, and, bringing to bear on it the traditions of intellectual history, I found much to dislike. Other than Peterson's chapter, the book tends to rely on an outdated canon of political philosophy, to flatten differences between liberal thinkers, to caricature non-liberal thinkers, and to create superficially coherent systems of thought that are historically chimerical, to say the least. Is there really no difference between the Pope and Hitler? Between Plato and Charles I of England? Do Locke and Hobbes really hold diametrically opposed notions of the nature of "man" and "the state, or society"? Is there really such a thing as "THE authoritarian theory"?

Schramm's treatment of Marxism seemed

like something you'd learn in high school civics. Siebert's treatment of the English background was put to shame by his far more sensitive, nuanced and critical account in *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776* (1952). In fact, the book's entire framework was grounded in a set of assumptions rooted in liberalism—for instance, that the basic polarity in political philosophy was the tension between the individual and the collective. This meant that the authoritative tone in which it mapped out the world concealed the particularity of its own *weltanschauung*—it pretended its feet were planted on an archimedean point that turned out to be its own forehead. (These and other arguments are more fully explored in my *Last Rights: revisiting four theories of the press*.) Moreover, I found that there was general agreement on these points among scholars in the field.

So, why was the book so successful? And why does it remain so successful? Two reasons immediately suggest themselves: its usefulness as a teaching tool and its appeal to the innate conservatism of journalism education.

Long experience has taught me the strength of *Four Theories'* appeal to an undergraduate class. I've taught around the book for 20 years now, and every attempt I've made to teach against it has ended in frustration. The schema is too neat. It's a wonderful gift for students struggling to understand how a complicated world is *supposed* to operate. As much as a teacher struggles against it in the indicative—it *isn't* that way, he *didn't* say that—one loses against it in the subjunctive. That is, it's much easier for students to figure out the way things *should* be if systems of thought really were the way *Four Theories* says. What I have to offer in place of *Four Theories* is not especially helpful—more of the typical historian's rant, but it's really more complicated than that.

The book's elegance seems scientific but, as I've already argued, it's ideological. That is, the schema covertly assumes that liberalism's problematic is the correct approach, even while challenging liberalism on an overt level. This contradiction, built into the text without design as a matter of accident, produces an appealing ambiguity and apparent openness that invites active reading on the part of students. But at

the same time, it is likely if not fated to reproduce the professional categories of the existing media system. This is what I mean by the innate conservatism of journalism education, which is supposed to bring a student to mature membership in the profession and acceptance of its prevailing ideals after being exposed to varieties of doubt, using doubt in much the same way that a seminary education does in producing clerics. (See, the Pope really isn't Hitler.)

On the one hand, it's the conservatism of the righteous, replete with aphorisms (the public's right to know, the marketplace of ideas, etc.) that match the subjunctive lessons of *Four Theories*. On the other hand, it's the conservatism of the world weary, of the cynic-for-a-living. After reading *Four Theories* sympathetically and internalizing its ethos, one hopes not so much to change the media system in the United States as to muddle along with it, fallen as it is from libertarianism and flaccid as it is in its embrace of social responsibility. So far from God and so close to Rupert Murdoch!

Why then has there never been a successor? Good books have tried—one thinks of Herbert Altschull's *Agents of Power*. I had the unpleasant satisfaction of editing and co-authoring another non-successor, *Last Rights*. At an early meeting of the authors, we decided that we were not in a position to write a new *Four Theories*, that to do so would require intensive meetings and hammering out of a consensual schema among scholars with very different beliefs and priorities. What schema could contain us? How long

would we have to work to find it? Our unwillingness drew solace from the knowledge that one of us, Cliff Christians, was already involved in such an intensive effort with an international team of scholars. Their schema is yet to appear; meanwhile there's *Four Theories*.

The authors of *Four Theories* did not have to spend years of intense conferencing and drafting to come to their shared schema. They had a far more intense common experience: World War II and its aftermath. They, along with the whole generation of journalism educators and mass communication scholars who built the institutions that people like me work in, learned how to think about political ideology and about the promise of the media in the process of a global struggle with fascism. And they won.

Another thing that Peterson told me, in his gracious comments on an early draft of *Last Rights*, hit it solid. What we failed to appreciate is the book's optimism. In that, it really is a creature of its time. It dared to grasp the big issues and the big thinkers, and to use them to fashion a way of knowing the world. More so, it dared to think that the world would be rebuilt according to theory. Its optimism sustains it half a century later although its authors did not, in the final analysis, have a world to rebuild. In the rather smaller time that I've been diddling with the book, the Cold War ended and the new mass medium of the Internet was born. Do any of us think we will rebuild the world? When will we get our optimism?