Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication

Four Theories of the Press

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Subject: Journalism Studies Online Publication Date: Aug 2018
DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.815

Summary and Keywords

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* has been a powerful influence on scholarship on comparative press systems and normative press theories in the years since its publication in 1956. Its appeal comes from the way it combined a history of Western development with a normative schema that is simple and teachable. Critics have pointed out the shortcomings of both its historical accounts and its theoretical structure, charging that the book expressed a Cold War mentality, elided non-Western and nonliberal theories and practices, and neglected the complicating dimensions of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Critics also note that actual press systems are usually governed by hybrid norms, and that press systems are increasingly interconnected, overlapping, and global. Yet, *Four Theories of the Press* retains significant influence despite these criticisms. One reason is that no real replacement has appeared and it is unlikely that a new map of normative theories will win acceptance. The work emerged at a unique moment of Western liberal global hegemony and a successor would require a similar hegemonic moment.

Keywords: press freedom, social responsibility theory, public sphere, comparative media systems, marketplace of ideas, objectivity, media roles, journalism studies

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Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do, by Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, has continued to influence journalism studies and journalism education since its publication in 1956. Its success, its authors maintained, was unforeseen and largely accidental. Its critics have also struggled both to explain its durability and to replace it.

The strength and longevity of *Four Theories* spring from two characteristics that critics underestimate. The first is the way it combines an apparently empirical map of media systems with a morally charged history. While seeming to simply describe the main categories of the world's media systems, the authors continually reference a Whiggish history in which authoritarian control yields to freedom of the press. Critics, myself

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included (Nerone, 1995), point out that neither the map nor the history is very accurate, and some offer better maps and better histories, but even the best of these (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012) lack the moral clarity of *Four Theories*. At the same time, work in media or journalism ethics (Christians et al., 2009) tends to sleight the concrete material and policy realities of media systems in favor of universalist norms. A number of critiques simply propose augmentations—adding "development" as a fifth theory of the press, for example. Just as the other critiques fail to dislodge the moral or normative appeal of *Four Theories*, critiques-by-augmentation miss its other trump card: its simplicity. Indeed, four seems to be the right number; five is too many. Simplicity has been especially important for its longevity as a teaching tool.

Summarizing *Four Theories*

The book's title refers to four ways of thinking about the media. These are called the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist theories of the press. The book asserts that these theories are defined by fundamental premises about key terms, which it identifies as the nature of "man," the nature of the state or society, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of truth. The authoritarian theory holds that man is weak and fallible, superseded historically and normatively by the collective society or state; that knowledge is either difficult or arcane, perhaps divinely inspired or revealed; and that truth is absolute. The libertarian theory is the opposite on each of these key points. The social responsibility theory begins with the premises of the libertarian theory but modifies them in light of the complexities of modern societies, in which mediating institutions like journalism are required to represent relatively weak individual citizens in the face of increasingly powerful government and business organizations. The Soviet communist theory represents a similar modification of authoritarian theory, where the Party replaces the priesthood, say, as the carrier of transhistorical truth.

There is an elegance to this schema, although there are problems with each reconstruction of a theory. The appeal and explanatory usefulness of the schema comes from its simplicity and apparent symmetry. It offers a vocabulary that can be taught easily and used by nonspecialists to characterize complicated things in simple and morally charged terms. It represented a significant advance over the prevailing norm in mainstream U.S. political discourse, which was a strident version of First Amendment evangelism (Lebovic, 2016). *Four Theories*, at least on the surface, supposes that there are other principles for constructing media policies, and that the world offers traditions and social systems that are not amenable to liberal axioms, even if it obviously prefers those that are. It also declines to limit the number of theories to the four it identifies, though it insists that those four "have largely determined what kind of press the Western world has had" (p. 6).

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The simplicity of the schema is in tension with its deeper commitment to the position that the society shapes the media. The key insight of *Four Theories* is that the press is not an autonomous system but rather a subsystem or intersystem of the larger political, social, and cultural system: “The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted” (pp. 1–2). But the book is not clear about what this means. The import of this insight varies from theory to theory and author to author. For Siebert, who wrote the chapters on the authoritarian and libertarian theories, the encompassing system or environment is the development of the modern West, with its ethos of individualism, scientific epistemology, and liberal economic and political institutions. For Schramm’s chapter on Soviet communism, the encompassing system is the party state. Peterson’s chapter on social responsibility theory sees the defining context as the tension between a commercial media system and an emerging profession seeking to serve a dependent citizenry.

Across these different embodiments of the key insight, the authors maintain that the best way to grasp the character of a media system is by divining the “theory” behind it: “To see the social systems in their true relationship to the press, one has to look at certain basic beliefs and assumptions which the society holds” (p. 2). Although they do not define “theory,” the subtitle indicates what they have in mind: “concepts of what the press should be and do.” The key word there is “should,” which means that theories are about norms and not structures. Theories, in other words, are not models or systems, though they might have a relationship with them: “In the last analysis, the difference between press systems is one of philosophy” (p. 2). The book proposes an idealist approach, even if its historical accounts sometimes invoke economic or technological factors.

To complicate matters, theory seems to mean different things in different chapters. Social responsibility theory amounts to a professional ideology; libertarianism is a condensed and arguably anachronistic reconstruction of a strand of Western intellectual history; the Soviet communist theory is a revolutionary ideology; and the authoritarian theory is, well, any notion that can support authoritarian practices. Some of these theories seem to nestle in the DNA of actual historical societies. Others inhabit the rhetorical surfaces.

Although the authors share a belief that “theory” is an important driver of historical change, some ideas have more power than others. The most powerful ideas seem to be those of the Enlightenment, which drove the development of media and political systems based on natural rights, constitutional law, and popular sovereignty. The emphasis on Enlightenment ideas points to the fact that the book is based just as much on a grand narrative of Western political and intellectual history as it is on an apparently timeless matrix of theories.

The grand narrative *Four Theories* offers sees a natural progression from an instinctive embrace of authoritarian theory and practice to gradual liberalization to a modification of liberal principles in light of the experience of the Industrial Revolution. (The Soviet communist theory is an aberration in this grand narrative, a throwback “derived from

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early authoritarians” [p. 27] and from “discarded” [p. 37] authoritarian theories.) This grand narrative was conventional by the time of the book’s composition, and is not much different from a Marxist narrative of the progression from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism to “late capitalism” or “monopoly capitalism” or the mass society. Nor is it much different in either its narrative or its idealism from Jürgen Habermas’s (1989) account of the structural transformation of the public sphere.

The synchronic structure of the work sits (uncomfortably) alongside a diachronic account of Western history. The history complicates and moderates the theory-matrix. *Four Theories* does not insist that existing states or societies exemplify any of the theories. Even the Soviet communist theory, the most explicitly programmatic of the theories, only loosely described the actual media system of the USSR. Likewise, “the practices of authoritarian states have tended to influence democratic practices. In some instances they have almost forced libertarian governments to take countersteps which in some aspects are indistinguishable from the totalitarian models” (p. 37). Rather, the authors construct these theories as ideal types, which can be used to diagnose societies or to characterize the implications of particular policies. Again, the theories are there to help one observe the different ways in which societies think the media are supposed to work.

But this schema did not emerge out of a scholarly vacuum. It expressed a Western common sense at the time of its publication and its authors had significant experience in working with governments, media systems, and news organizations in ways that reflected and refined that common sense.

History of the Book

There is a familiar version of the book’s genesis. The authors themselves say the book was composed accidentally and casually. Critics, on the other hand, have tied the book to both the broad intellectual currents of its moment and to a liberal internationalist agenda that the authors, especially Schramm, had worked toward. Another impulse, grounded in journalism education, has drawn little attention but illuminates the book’s form and durability.

In most accounts, including Ted Peterson’s, the book was written by accident, which explains why it was not more carefully developed. The immediate impetus came from Schramm, who had been working on a grant from the National Council of Churches (NCC) to investigate the question of “responsibility in mass communications,” part of the NCC’s partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation aimed at exploring ethics and responsibility in modern life (see Guback in Nerone, 1995, p. 8). Schramm had some money left over from this project. He ran into Peterson and Siebert, his colleagues in the College of Communications at the University of Illinois, at the water cooler one day and proposed coauthoring a short collection. In the book’s preface, Schramm thanks the NCC for permitting him to use these pieces for the book, acknowledging that they were, in

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effect, “work for hire.” Schramm was thus able to submit the book to the University of Illinois Press, where he was the director at the time. It joined the company of Shannon’s and Weaver’s *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949), which he had also shepherded into publication, along with his landmark collections *Communications in Modern Society* (1948), *Mass Communications* (1949), and *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (1954).

The three authors shared much in common. All were broadly educated and accomplished writers with significant experience in public life. Schramm was easily the most prominent. He had earned a master of arts in literature at Harvard and a doctorate in American civilization at the University of Iowa, where he also founded the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, wrote stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and became director of the School of Journalism. During World War II, Schramm joined Iowa’s President George Stoddard in working for the Office of War Information; in 1947, Stoddard took Schramm with him to Illinois, where Stoddard became president and Schramm became director of the Division of Communication, a new unit that encompassed the journalism school and the radio station but also the theater program, the university press, and the athletics department. One of Schramm’s initial moves was to establish the Institute of Communications Research, a soft-money institute that would do research for hire for media and telecommunications companies as well as various military and covert branches of the federal government. Famously, Schramm worked on “psychological warfare” during the Korean War (Glander, 1999; Simpson, 1994). He was also involved in UNESCO, leading to a career-long dedication to international aspects of media studies and development. Rantanen (2017) points out that “Four Papers on Propaganda Theory,” a document he coauthored for the United States Information Agency (USIA), prefigured the structure of *Four Theories*.

Siebert had studied journalism at Wisconsin before coming to Illinois to study law in 1927 and take up a faculty position in the journalism school in 1931. He became a recognized authority on press law and wrote a standard textbook and consulted with Colonel McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*. He became dean of Illinois’s School of Journalism in 1941, but with Schramm’s arrival found time to do archival research in Britain and write his magnum opus, *Freedom of the Press in England* (1952), a book that includes a list of “theories” of freedom of the press that anticipates *Four Theories*. Rantanen (2017, p. 3459) argues that “the use of the word ‘theory’ in F[our] T[heories] clearly came from Siebert’s book.”

Peterson came to Illinois as an assistant professor of journalism and a doctoral candidate in the inaugural cohort of the Institute of Communications Research in 1947. Like Siebert, he had grown up in Minnesota, and he had done research in the British archives during his posting there in World War II. Siebert became Peterson’s adviser and directed his dissertation on the history of US magazines. Schramm was also on the committee, and, after Peterson defended in 1955, he became a full professor. Later, after Schramm went to Stanford University in 1954 and Siebert to Michigan State in 1957, Peterson

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would become dean of the renamed College of Journalism and Communications, a position he held until 1979.

Most scholars who write about *Four Theories* focus on its intellectual legacy. On the positive side, the book is said to have marked an advance in normative theory, as well as to have inaugurated the subfield of comparative media systems. Rantanen (2017) argues that “the great achievement of FT is that it uses the idea of a system, introduces the concept of a press system, and suggests using the same criteria in comparing different press systems to each other” (Rantanen, 2017, p. 3464). This is a defensible position. Previously, “system” had been used in communication primarily to refer to technology-based networks like the Bell System. Rantanen also points out that Schramm uses “system” more frequently than the other *Four Theories* authors, which reflects his involvement in a long chain of governance-related activities.

Schramm’s liberal internationalism shaped the overall structure of *Four Theories*, even if it is less apparent within Siebert’s and Peterson’s chapters. It drew on an emerging theory of modernization, and Schramm networked with scholars like his future coauthor Daniel Lerner (1958) and Walt W. Rostow (1956, 1960), who sketched out a natural history of economic and political development in which societies moved from traditional patterns characterized by oral communication to modern, liberal societies characterized by “high mass consumption” and mass communications that cultivated “empathy.” Schramm’s book, *Mass Media and National Development* (1964), built on this paradigm. This version of modernization theory fit well into postwar trends in both communications research and journalism education.

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm shared teaching responsibilities for a standard course in the political philosophy of the media. On the undergraduate level, this course was called Mass Communication in a Democratic Society. On the graduate level, it was History and Theory of Freedom of the Press. (I inherited these courses when I joined the Illinois faculty in 1983, along with several boxes of class files that included material from Siebert and Jay Jensen.) The undergrad course was designed as a capstone course for journalism majors; its format featured discussions of canonical texts, including the liberal thinkers so prominent in Siebert’s chapters of *Four Theories*. The doctoral seminar was structured as a sweeping history of Western political thought, with Jay Jensen’s (1957) dissertation, “Liberalism, Democracy, and the Mass Media,” subsequently serving as a blueprint. Jensen, who might be thought of as a ghost coauthor of *Four Theories*, was the head of the journalism department and one of Peterson’s mentors.

The link between these courses and *Four Theories* is obvious, and points to a curricular agenda. Journalism schools had grown in US colleges and universities since the first decade of the 20th century, but as undergraduate professional programs they lacked both the prestige of graduate-level professional programs (law, medicine) and the intellectual legitimacy of the hard sciences, social sciences, and humanities. A generation of journalism school administrators and faculty had worked to redress this problem, mostly by adopting a social science approach to studying the press as a remedy to the

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intellectual deficit. The most influential academic leader in that regard had been Willard Bleyer at the University of Wisconsin, where Siebert had studied. Schramm took this approach to the next level, by "seeding" journalism schools at Iowa, then Illinois, and then Stanford with doctoral programs in communications. Requiring undergraduate journalism students and doctoral candidates in communications to read Milton, Locke, and Mill was integral to this mission of uplift. Therefore, *Four Theories* also embodies a mission to make the study of the media part of a liberal arts education. According to Schwarzlose (1978), Schramm got the idea for *Four Theories* after sitting in on a session of Siebert's seminar on the history and theory of freedom of the press.

Criticism

Two types of critique have been written about *Four Theories*. The first focuses on the book as written, and points out shortcomings. The second aims more at what *Four Theories* is not, and points to theories the book did not take up, or argues that its normative and idealistic approach fails to address existing media systems.

The first type is exemplified by *Last Rights* (Nerone, 1995), a book-length "revisiting" of *Four Theories* by faculty members of the University of Illinois's College of Communications. The authors argue that *Four Theories* does a bad job of doing specific theories. The authoritarian theory, they say, is not really a theory at all, but rather a set of practices that Siebert collects and then associates with a diverse range of philosophers, politicians, and religious leaders, including Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hegel, Rousseau, Carlyle, Mussolini, Hitler, Marx, the Pope, and Tudor monarchs. These figures share little beyond their association with some of the practices Siebert identifies as authoritarian. It is a stretch to say that the Pope shares Hitler's "theory of mass communications."

A similar argument can be made about the libertarian theory. Although the historical connections among the thinkers identified in that chapter are more solid, there are many divergences. Siebert (1952) identified three different libertarian theories in English history. Jefferson's approach to freedom of the press differs significantly from that of John Stuart Mill, who saw mass circulation newspapers and magazines as a threat to the individuality that was the source of the social utility derived from free discussion. Liberalism is as diverse in practice as it is in theory. Siebert's chapters note that libertarian systems adopt authoritarian practices when convenient. He also notes that there is more than one way to administer a broadcasting system in libertarian societies, with most Western countries supporting a national broadcaster with social responsibilities, while the United States embraces private ownership and market competition. Siebert implies that the United States is the best example of a libertarian system, though he falls short of fully arguing the case.

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Peterson's chapter on the "social responsibility theory" is the one that comes closest to being an explication of a theory. It focuses on the documents produced by the Hutchins Commission, particularly its report "A Free and Responsible Press" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947), which is itself an articulate summary of the theory. Peterson shows how media professionals embraced the commission's findings, even as many disputed its authority. The clarity and concreteness of the "theory" came from its adoption by a specific professional formation. Industrialization has made traditional libertarian theory obsolete, a development that arguably took place on the broad and diffuse social level that Siebert asserts is the locus of genuine philosophical history. But the elucidation of social responsibility theory was concrete and specific, and was tied to particular actors. In other words, social responsibility theory is a professional ideology, not a Weltanschauung, to use the word that Jay Jensen (1957) favored. This change in register is confirmed by the fact that the book treats social responsibility as a variant of the libertarian theory. It could well have outlined several other variants.

Peterson associated social responsibility theory with objective journalism. The Hutchins Commission's "requirements" for a responsible press assume that a media organization has the capacity to represent the world objectively. At the same time, Peterson was aware of the critique of objectivity. He and Siebert treated the rise of objectivity as a moment in the larger career of the "marketplace of ideas." This concept itself deserves some discussion.

Siebert and many others (Smith, 1988) take the notion of the marketplace of ideas to be a timeless and essential part of libertarian theory. They argue that it is inherent in the "self-righting mechanism" found in Milton's *Areopagitica*, for instance, when he argues that truth and falsehood should be left free to "grapple," confident that truth would always win "in a free and open encounter." But Milton's argument is that truth will win because it has divine power, not that it will win because it will be preferred by consumers of ideas, or that it will win because it has cost efficiencies, or indeed any other advantage modern folk associate with market competition. In fact, marketplaces do not select out for truth, but aim to adjust the balance of interests among competing individuals to produce something like fairness. Even so, marketplaces that feature "free and open encounters" are rare, and, arguably, have been regulated into existence.

John Durham Peters (2004) has pointed out that the term "marketplace of ideas" is a fairly recent coinage. It dates from after World War I and is usually attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose opinion in the Abrams case refers to "the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." The term is rarely found in news or books before the mid to late 1930s, but became common thereafter. Its vogue neatly matches the rise of the terms "mass communications" and "mass media," which is no coincidence. Implicit in the notion of the marketplace of ideas is a recognition that the actual marketplace in which newspapers traditionally competed had become restricted as the media industrialized. Mass communications meant that ideas had to compete inside artificial media spaces, which in turn meant that media owners now had a responsibility

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to represent the full spectrum of legitimate ideas (Nerone, 2015, pp. 144–145). In other words, the very term "marketplace of ideas" is a product of the media environment that made the libertarian theory obsolete.

The projection of the "marketplace of ideas" concept onto the origins of the libertarian theory is evidence of a parallel projection of libertarian principles into the social responsibility theory. The growth of the mass media in the United States strained "free market" approaches to First Amendment theory and press-government relations. Some argued that the media should be regulated as "common carriers," in the same way as "natural monopolies," like telephone systems. The scary way in which fascist dictatorships coopted privately held media operators convinced many that a more direct form of media democracy was required (Lebovic, 2016). The Hutchins Commission contemplated stronger forms of regulation, including antitrust action and government ownership of bottlenecks in the system (Pickard, 2015). But libertarians on the commission pushed back, and in the end social responsibility theory did not embrace structural reform. As a result, "responsibility" for serving the needs of an increasingly diverse and dependent society fell on editorial employees who did not have the power or autonomy to fulfill it. To his credit, Peterson notes the tensions involved in the simultaneous imposing of responsibilities and acceptance of corporate ownership of monopoly media, and points out the irony involved in news professionals, in particular, proclaiming their responsibilities and at the same time complaining that the commission lacked the authority to criticize them. Peterson's careful and sympathetic treatment makes his chapter the book's most adequate.

And Schramm's chapter is the least. His "Soviet communist theory" is a caricature of the actual Soviet media system, which was itself at best a caricature of Marxist media theory. Schramm's personal familiarity with the Soviet system was a byproduct of his "psychological warfare" or counterpropaganda work with US government agencies. Such activities were not labeled "authoritarian" in *Four Theories*, though Marxism is treated throughout as a variant of the authoritarian theory.

Augmentations

The book does not well represent the varieties of media systems, media philosophies, and journalisms of its own day. The chapter on Soviet communism exemplifies this weakness. Even if it were accurate, focusing on Soviet communism elides and misrepresents the spectrum of other nonlibertarian and noncapitalist media systems, philosophies, and journalisms. Indeed, one might argue that the chapter is simply filling a space marked "other" to complete the book's triumphal narrative of Western liberalism (Szpunar, 2012).

Beginning in the late 1960s and accelerating after, scholars recognized the inadequacy of the book's representation of non-Western alternatives. An obvious impulse for this was the changing geopolitical order. The immediate postwar system revolved around a bipolar

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competition between US/Western versus Soviet spheres or philosophies of governance. But by the 1970s the global South had reshaped this East-West model. The so-called nonaligned movement in turn promoted the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which drew attention to the many ways in which the liberal notion of the free flow of information concealed and reinforced northern hegemony. A norm as seemingly simple as “freedom of the press” might mean something quite different to countries in the global South, where Western media entities appeared as agents of “cultural imperialism.” NWICO activists instead proposed reforms like a “right of reply” or rethinking the right to free expression as a “right to communicate,” which would in turn imply a duty on the part of the global north to recognize other voices (MacBride Commission, 1980).

An obvious fix *to Four Theories* at that point seemed to be to add a fifth theory that would explain the global South. Mowlana (1971) and others proposed “development journalism” or “development communication,” attempting to identify norms that would come from a mission to further social development (Shah, 1996). Such a media system would counter the tendency in Western news organizations to emphasize conflict and disaster, or “coups and earthquakes” (Rosenblum, 1979). Similarly, Picard (1985) proposed adding a “social democratic” model, drawing his inspiration from the Nordic countries’ practice of supporting news media with public subsidies. Vaca-Baqueiro (2018) offers a list of such augmentations. The many attempts to round out the paradigm by adding theories have not convinced the book’s critics. Add-ons approach the book at a superficial level and most scholars think its problems run deeper.

The range of nonliberal alternatives in *Four Theories* is limited because the book’s notion of what constitutes a “theory” is based on dimensions derived specifically from liberalism. The primary polarity in the *Four Theories* paradigm is between “man” and the “state” or the “society.” In this schema, people consist of atomic individuals who reside in one society and are subjects of one state. The book is unable to see groups larger than an individual and smaller than a state, or people who straddle societies or states, or societies with more than one competing state, or transnational or global forms of governance, or governance by nonstate actors. We could go on. Critics have pointed out that these blind spots are characteristic of liberalism, and are in fact constitutive of the hegemonic liberal subject, which is historically white, male, heterosexual, and Christian. Theories that recognize the limits of liberal theory (other than the Soviet communist theory) are absent from *Four Theories* and even the Soviet theory is caricatured by being forced into the polarity of “man versus state” (ironically, because its first premise is usually construed as “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”). Class is systematically absent from the previous chapters and is represented in the Soviet communist theory primarily as a way of camouflaging totalitarianism as “dictatorship of the working class.”

Other forms of identification, such as race and gender, are almost totally absent from *Four Theories*. The exception is Peterson’s treatment of the Hutchins Commission’s requirement that the media give a “representative picture of the constituent groups in

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the society" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 26). Peterson explains the requirement this way: "this requirement would have the press accurately portray the social groups, the Chinese and the Negroes, for example, since persons tend to make decisions in terms of favorable or unfavorable images and a false picture can subvert accurate judgment" (p. 91). Again, the stakes are put in terms of the individual sovereign citizen making judgments of fact about the society, rather than the distribution of power or recognition among groups in the society. To be fair to Peterson, he is accurately reporting the Hutchins Commission's meaning here.

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Against Normative Theory

The criticisms of *Four Theories* discussed thus far aim at the book the authors intended to write, and do not necessarily challenge the overall project. But the project makes sense only if one accepts two premises. The first is that there are press systems that correspond to national systems and that they can be compared if one chooses the correct dimensions or criteria. The other is that these dimensions can be expressed in terms of normative ideals. Many of the critiques that follow challenge these basic premises.

The presumption of *Four Theories* that normative models defined by liberal terms could be constructed to describe the world's media systems has inspired critics like Paolo Mancini to characterize its approach as "stupid normativity" (Nerone, 2012, p. 452). It is stupid to expect that norms generated by one philosophy nurtured by a historically specific social order can be applied to very different social orders with very different philosophies. The norm of journalistic objectivity is an example. It is well suited to systems in which highly institutionalized media offer a significant degree of autonomy to professionalized journalists, who can in turn serve as referees for competitive political contests in social orders in which power is distributed in a somewhat fair manner. Absent any of those conditions, objectivity tends to mystify and preserve an existing unfair distribution or concentration of power. Ironically, this critique of *Four Theories* is in part based on the book's initial premise, that the press system takes its "form and coloration" from the social system.

Another line of attack is to start with the social and political system and build out the media system as a coevolving system or "complex" (Vaca-Baqueiro, 2018). An early and relatively successful version of this approach is J. H. Altschull's *Agents of Power* (1984). As the title indicates, Altschull argues that the element present in all the ways that societies organize a media system is the foundational constraint that media will be agents of power—that is, the media system will complement the way that power is distributed in the society. Power is the basic melody of media systems. Societies have composed variations on that melody, and Altschull identifies three "movements": "market," "Marxist," and "advancing." The first corresponds to the libertarian theory in *Four Theories*, but Altschull emphasizes the economic structure of this type of system rather than its philosophy as defining the role it plays in the way the society is ordered. The second is a more diverse and sympathetic substitute for Schramm's Soviet communist theory. The third characterizes the role of the press in developing countries; Altschull prefers the term "advancing" because it does not assume or imply a standard path of modernization.

Altschull's book made two contributions to the scholarly discourse. The less important was to offer a substitute set of models for the four presented by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm. The more important was to refocus attention from the philosophical

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explanations of media systems to their material structures. He meant to eliminate the bias in favor of liberalism that was evident in *Four Theories* and to offer instead a map of media systems that are in some ways morally equivalent.

Altschull's move paralleled a flourishing of critical theory about Western media. Much of this scholarship traced its lineage to the Frankfurt School or to Gramsci and revolved around the critique of liberalism as an ideology. For critical scholars, "freedom of the press" could not be understood without interrogating the material interests behind the press. One logical conclusion of this line of critique was that the "free" operation of the media system tended to produce a steady flow of system-supporting content, a function that made it in effect a "propaganda" system (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the landscape for critical theory. The end of the Cold War seemed to place the judgment of history onto Schramm's Soviet model, but at the same time it removed part of the stigma from Marxist-inspired media analysis, which could no longer be glibly dismissed as authoritarian or totalitarian.

If what we call the free press is a propaganda system, then what kind of media system would *not* be a propaganda system? Although critical scholars hardly proposed that all media systems are equally bad, the implication of their critique was that existing scholarly approaches to normative theory and media ethics were out of touch with reality. Was there a normative position that would promote the kind of discourse that democracy requires to produce fairness?

Many turned to Jürgen Habermas for an answer to this problem. Habermas proposed norms that were based on the pragmatics of democratic discourse. In his account of the Western development of the public sphere, the beginning of the modern era featured the development of a bourgeois class that began to think of its activities as autonomous from the state. In bourgeois struggles for freedom of commerce and conscience, Habermas saw a growing separation between civil society and the state, with aspects of civil society, like family life, religion, and business, appearing as private activities that should be protected with a barricade of rights. The space between civil society and the state evolved as the "bourgeois public sphere," a term that would come to have tremendous appeal in the 1990s, after the 1989 translation of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989) was published.

The separation of public and private in the bourgeois public sphere became a driver of normative development. When citizens stepped into public space to participate in deliberation, they were supposed to leave their individual personal identities behind and speak only as a citizen or "public man," to translate Publius, the pseudonymous author of the *Federalist Papers*. The requirement to speak as nobody or anybody has been called "personal negation" (Warner, 1990). This norm was accompanied by an expectation of "universal supervision," which meant that any public utterance, but especially one in print, would be seen by everybody. In a normative bourgeois public sphere, a citizen was supposed to speak as anybody or nobody talking to everybody. If a person took these

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conditions seriously, Habermas proposed, the resulting discourse could be called "rational."

Habermas argued that 18th-century conditions made these norms practical but that 20th-century conditions had undermined them. Although the 18th-century public was, in theory, unrestricted, in fact it was limited to a rather narrow group of propertied white Christian males. It was easy for them to pretend to be anybody or nobody, because they formed a rather homogeneous group. But as the suffrage expanded in the 19th century, people began to assert their class, racial, and gender identities as fundamental to their politics. At the same time, the media system shifted from a print system with low barriers to entry and impersonal forms to a broadcast system that was industrial in scale and personality-driven. The result, Habermas argued, was the "refeudalization" of the public sphere.

Critics who followed Habermas tried to find policy proposals that would cultivate a more rational and democratic public sphere. These ranged from proposals for different models of journalism to movements for changes in media ownership regulation. Among journalism professionals, the "public" or "civic" journalism movement drew on Habermas for its inspiration. Flourishing in the 1990s, fed by widespread alarm over citizen disenchantment (Putnam, 2000) and declining audiences for news media, the public journalism movement looked for ways to enfranchise readers, giving them an active role in setting the agenda and inviting them to participate in public forums. Noting that journalists had cultivated a persona as adversaries of the powerful, public journalism advocates asked "What are journalists for?" (Rosen, 1999). The answer they gravitated toward was a mission of making politics work better. Public journalism looked like an extension of Peterson's social responsibility theory, though it was driven by journalism professionals rather than by the public or public intellectuals, like the Hutchins Commission had been.

Meanwhile, a media reform movement spread. Critics in this vein also drew inspiration from Habermas, arguing that media monopolies restricted and distorted public deliberation in ways that supported an unequal distribution of power (McChesney, 2004). To this movement, *Four Theories* was an example of the inadequacy of the policy discourse that idealized the "marketplace of ideas" concept.

The Habermasian moment, in sum, provided an alternative way to formulate and organize approaches to media policy. If *Four Theories* expressed liberalism in its Cold War moment, Habermas and his followers expressed a "late liberal" or "postliberal" position, one in which a simulation of public deliberation in the media should resemble a seminar rather than a marketplace. The major criticisms of Habermas (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) argue that he was not postliberal enough and that Habermasian ideals of public discourse smuggle in the subjectivity of the classic white propertied Christian male citizen and conceal forms of power that marginalize women and people of color. For these critics, *Four Theories* was even more inadequate.

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Four Theories had little to say about minority populations, but what it did have to say followed the Hutchins Commission report’s wish for less biased representations in media content. Representation, of course, does not equal voice, so *Four Theories* was not equipped to consider a multicultural situation in which various groups in a society all have claims on everyone. At best, the book imagined a cultural pluralism, in which there was a main culture that permitted expression of ornamental cultural differences. Moreover, Four Theories thought that objective journalism would fairly represent the groups in the society. But the practices of objectivity have been found to instead reinforce an already skewed set of representations, even as they strive for color-blind standards (Dolan, 2011; Heider, 2000).

This shortcoming became especially prominent in the 1990s. People of color in the West acquired increased voice in media, culture, and politics, making the liberal value of individual equality seem inadequate. Even more striking conflicts appeared in non-Western countries. In India, violence springing from tensions among religious communities led to the weakening of the tradition of secularism that had dominated politics since independence, and in many African democracies similar group conflicts demanded political solutions that went beyond basic guarantees of individual rights.

Recognizing the complexity of the normative landscape, scholars looked for less normative and more practical ways to map media systems. The most influential work in the early years of the 21st century was Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s (2004) *Comparing Media Systems*. They rejected the “universalizing approach” of *Four Theories*, which they say “held back the field for many decades, producing superficial analyses not based on detailed research on particular media systems and often riddled with ethnocentric assumptions” (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, p. 1). Instead of using *Four Theories*’ philosophical positions on the nature of man, the state or society, knowledge, and truth, they identified four social, political, and economic dimensions: the structure of media markets, the extent of political parallelism (or partisanism, essentially), journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This allowed them to identify three configurations, or models, of media systems in the Western world—a partisan southern European model, a market-based north Atlantic model, and a social democratic northern European model. They insisted that their three models were appropriate only for the countries they had studied in detail, and refused to draw conclusions, normative or otherwise, about media in the rest of the world. “To try to fit China onto the triangle defined by our three models would simply be silly” (2012, p. 5). Huang (2003) makes the same point about applying normative models from *Four Theories* and Altschull to China, and suggests a “transitional” approach to such media systems. A follow-up volume (Hallin & Mancini, 2012) brought together scholars of non-Western media systems to address the applicability of their models to non-Western systems, with mixed results.

The advantage of Hallin and Mancini’s approach is its emphasis on structural and empirical observation of existing media systems. As a result, their book has been influential among scholars of comparative political systems who disregarded *Four Theories* altogether and have traditionally held work in journalism and communication in

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low esteem. There is some empirical support for Hallin and Mancini's dimensions (Brüggemann et al., 2014). Unlike *Four Theories*, *Comparing Media Systems* has inspired scholars individually and collectively to do replicable work, resulting in a tremendous growth in research into comparative media systems, especially among scholars based in Europe (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

At the same time, some scholars have questioned the value of the notion of media systems as commonly used. In *Four Theories*, the authors assumed that a nation had a media system that could be characterized by a single implied or explicit philosophy. But even Siebert et al. pointed out that any media system contained exceptions. So, for instance, in the United States the broadcast system was governed by a set of public responsibilities, while print media claimed more latitude. Lee Bollinger (1994) would later argue that there were two different traditions of liberal media policy in the United States, and that this kind of pluralism was beneficial. It makes sense that any media system would be a hybrid of policy positions. Certainly any news organization knows instinctively that different rules apply to different types of reporting. Political reporting and other topics considered hard or high-value news typically demand a different sort of professionalism than sports journalism, though a critic might hope that the rules could be swapped out. Mellado et al. (2017) find that characterizations of media roles, especially regarding journalism, are increasingly blurry in the real world: "differences in the performance of journalistic roles in news across countries do not show clear patterns that resemble either existing ideal media system typologies or political or regional clusters, but instead reveal patterns of multilayered hybrid journalistic cultures" (p. 950).

Beyond the complexities within any particular media system, there are increasing interactions among media in different systems. It makes sense to wonder whether any national media sphere can achieve the closure that defines a system in the classic sense. Certainly the United States has been noted for its media chauvinism, and has proven resistant to media imports—see, for instance, the frustrations of Al Jazeera America (Davis, 2013). But even the United States has been penetrated by global actors like NewsCorp and RT (formerly Russia Today). In 2017 the largest shareholder of the *New York Times*, was Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim. There is good reason to question whether media systems are concrete and discrete enough to be compared (Norris, 2009; Rantanen, 2013; Sparks, 2017; Voltmer, 2013). Perhaps every media system should now be regarded as "transitional" (Huang, 2003).

A large part of the national focus of media system scholarship is a byproduct of an instinctive focus on news media and, within news media, on political reporting. The nation-state remains the protagonist of most political news, and, ideologically, most political reporters embrace a role of critic or advocate of political personnel or processes. But this domain of media activity is relatively small, despite its outsized reputation. It is the superego of the media. Modern media organizations draw larger audiences and revenues from entertainment and sports, which are only loosely tied to the nation-state, and moreover are typically governed by rather different norms.

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The assumption that media systems are national in scope seems especially fragile today. The aftermath of electoral contests in the 2010s provided clear evidence of the ways in which media both old and new could be "hacked" by actors outside of a particular country. Critics pointed out that the only novelty in this situation was who was getting hacked. The United States and the United Kingdom had spent many of the years since World War I hacking the media systems of most other countries in the world, both covertly and overtly, so it seemed disingenuous to feign alarm at being supposedly hacked in turn by Russia. For most of the world, the vulnerability of national media systems and public spheres to external influence had been an urgent concern since at least the NWICO debates in the 1970s (MacBride Commission, 1980).

The rise of digital networked media has only reinforced this concern. If at first some anticipated a new decentered world of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2010), it quickly became clear that the global internet has become dominated by a small number of highly capitalized platforms, service providers, and equipment manufacturers, and that the next generation of governance will likely feature continuing struggles for dominance by the host nations of these giants.

Rescuing Normativity

Much of the work described so far has been deeply suspicious of normative approaches. Media systems should be compared on the basis of what they are and do, critics argue, rather than on the norms they invoke. Media performance should be judged on how it distributes power, a function that can be profoundly divorced from ethical claims.

But other critics seek to strengthen the normative thrust of the *Four Theories* approach. The most influential recent attempt to do this was by Christians et al., in *Normative Theories of the Media* (2009). Like Hallin and Mancini, Christians et al. do not claim to encompass the entire universe. They limit their domain to democracies. Also, like Hallin and Mancini, they focus primarily on news media, but unlike Hallin and Mancini, they foreground normative theory rather than institutional structure. They consider "should" to be the key word in the full title of *Four Theories*. But they are modest in their attempt to find universal norms, and instead offer a set of different "roles," acknowledging that several of these will coexist in a given news organization or media system.

If they are modest in terms of universal claims, Christians et al. are nevertheless very ambitious in other ways. Their chronological reach is vast, and matches that of *Four Theories*, which commented on the political traditions of ancient Greece and Rome as well as early modern Europe and more recent thought. However, all due respect to Siebert, Christians et al. do a better job with this material. They are also more open to democratic traditions from outside the Western world. Their ambition in that regard also

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stands in contrast to Hallin's and Mancini's reticence to impose their schema on countries with which they are personally unfamiliar.

Christians et al. seek to explore the world's democratic traditions in order to enrich the normative discourse. This sets them apart from the social scientific project of Hallin and Mancini, who seek to provide a conceptual framework for building an adequate schema to describe and compare the world's media systems. Both Christians et al. and Hallin and Mancini offer toolkits that allow for the construction of many more than four theories. In this, they recognize the hybrid and multidimensional processes that go into formulating actual media systems. But neither book comes close to the trick that *Four Theories* pulled off: blending normative and descriptive approaches and reducing the models to four, or rather to two. No such project seems possible today.

Conclusion

Four Theories came from a moment of global hegemony. It expressed both the hopefulness and ambitions of liberalism in the post-World War II moment. The ascendance of liberalism, with its presumed subjectivity, provided an opportunity to merge empirical and normative inquiry into a seductive and powerful synthesis. The moment of *Four Theories* ended long before the passing of the Cold War. Since the fall of the Soviet bloc, the book has seemed at best quaint, at worst stupid and evil, even while ironically acquiring a post-Soviet currency and a new Russian translation (Vartanova, 2009).

The world does not currently feature the sort of distribution of power that would enable a hegemonic mapping of media systems or normative theories. Neither empirical approaches like that of Hallin and Mancini nor normative explorations like Christians et al. claim the scope of *Four Theories*, and, nevertheless, are attacked as extending Western dominance of media studies. Meanwhile, the media themselves are undergoing a transformation—from "mass" to "network"—that challenges any conceptual schema.

Perhaps this is a transitional moment and a new map of systems and norms will coalesce. If so, it will be because a new global hegemony has appeared. One could imagine a new *Four Theories*, one centered not upon market liberalism but upon European-style social democracy or Chinese-style market authoritarianism. Or perhaps the world will not again see a moment in which such simplification is possible.

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