HANDBOOKS IN COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory

Edited by Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler

Volume I

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Volume I

Edited by

Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler

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Introduction

Media and mass communication theory is both a rich field and a potentially frustrating one. Its richness comes in the first place from the fact that the media themselves are so varied, operate under so many different political and cultural systems, and have such ambiguous connections to their various audiences that there is ample opportunity for theory construction and testing. In the second place it comes from the various methodological approaches that have been developed to test theories or to apply different ideological, cultural, economic, psychological, or social theories within the orbit of media. The reality is that the media do not exist as an independent sphere where they can be neatly envisioned and tested within a closed system, but rather they are in continual flux with other elements of the human experience – a state that makes their operations and impacts both elusive and rich. The frustration comes from the same reality. People want to know, and people assume they know, what media are causing in their societies, even when it has proven impossible to demonstrate cause and effect in a way that would satisfy most statisticians – and, even more to the point, there are wide disagreements among theorists as to whether looking for causation is a reasonable enterprise. Some are convinced that this is the only legitimate social scientific approach of any real value – especially if the issue is influencing public policy applied to media – while others are equally convinced that such endeavors are a fool's errand.

What we have tried to do in this two-volume handbook is to explore the varieties of theories that have been developed to deal with issued raised by the operations of media in society. We could have expanded these two volumes into four, or even more, if the theoretical approaches explained here had been applied to situations in even more numerous countries than we have included. But this would have had diminishing returns, and so our plan has been to include enough case studies (applications in different contexts) to give a sense of what is possible theoretically when different contexts are taken into account. As a result, we believe that these two volumes provide a rich set of perspectives that can inform efforts to understand

the media around the globe. We have purposely sought out authors not only from different theoretical traditions, but also from different parts of the world. We wanted to see what theories have developed and have been applied in non-Western contexts, both in order to give them the exposure that they deserve outside the "Western canon" and in order to show how they might inform further theory development in the Western world. We also wanted students of media to recognize that there is still much that we do not know about the relationship of media to society or culture and that there are thus many avenues still open for detailed examinations, speculations, and theory development within their own contexts. Those who read the chapters in these volumes should not assume that this is all there is to say about media. Neither should they assume that this is an idiosyncratic selection of media essays. When we were unable to find someone to write about certain topics, we have taken on the task ourselves, so that we could include theories that we thought would move the whole toward comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, a reader might wish he or she had found here a chapter that is "missing," and we will be the first to admit that this may well be the case. We ask for your indulgence should that occur, and we accept the blame that may be forthcoming for any missing perspectives.

For those of you who wish you had been asked to write, but were not, we wish we had known about your work or application. A reference work of this scope requires far more knowledge of a global theoretical environment than we suspect any of us could hope to achieve. We do think, however, that those scholars we were able to locate from around the planet, and whose work is represented here, all have something valuable to say, and we invite you to explore various options for understanding media and mass communication from their quite different perspectives. We think you will find it a fulfilling use of your time.

We have divided these two volumes into six parts, some containing more chapters than others. We could have filled many volumes with case studies from different parts of the world, but we thought it better to provide illustrative case studies that scholars could use to inform their their own work rather than to have a case study on every possible media subject in every region, country, or culture on the planet. The latter would have been far too cumbersome a project; it would probably discourage many people from even attempting to learn from others, because the task would seem overly daunting and burdensome. We all know how much scholars are expected to keep up with as they attempt to understand this discipline completely. We did not want to create more problems than we solved (assuming we did solve any).

One obvious question in theorizing about media and mass communication is what media to include. The worldwide development of the multiplayer and multinational game World of Warcraft (WOW) is just one example of this problem. Is WOW a medium in its own right or merely an application within the medium we know as the world wide web? Or is it an aspect of the more specific use of the web that we refer to as Web 2.0, or the user-generated web? When the *New York Times*

puts its daily edition on the web, is that two media, or merely one set of content encountered in different ways – perhaps little different from one person sitting at a breakfast table reading the *Times* while drinking his coffee, a second reading it on a commuter train traveling to the city from Long Island, a third sitting on the subway using her tablet to read it, and a fourth using his smart phone for the same purpose. They are all reading, but their contexts are different – and in many cases their devices are different as well. Now the *Times* has videos and blogs on its website. How many media are we actually looking at, then? Again, we have tried to include as much of this complexity as we could without overwhelming the reader. We hope it is not too much to ask those who pick up these volumes to read outside their comfort zone – to look at what those from different theoretical or methodological traditions have to say about this matter we study, which is what John Dewey called "the most wonderful" affair: communication. We have certainly had our comfort zones stretched and have learned immeasurably more from the task of putting this book together than we anticipated. We hope it can have the same result for all of you.

As to the specific content, there are, as we said, six parts. Part I covers what we call classical theories of media and the press and includes attention to history, political economy, symbols and semiotics, media effects, media ecology, dramatistic and ritual theories, propaganda and "technics." This is one of the two longest parts of the book (in terms of number of chapters) and will give every reader a full quiver of possibilities in thinking about the media in specific contexts.

The second part deals with theories about audiences, social construction, and social control. Some theories that you might think belong in the "classical tradition," such as agenda setting and uses and gratifications, are here, and we hope they are useful in helping you see how these theories can be used in contexts outside their original formulations. There are also chapters on the social construction (actually, cultural construction) of news, on the development of identity, and on the relationship between the public, civil society and the public sphere, both in domestic and international settings.

The third part we've called "New Approaches and Reconsiderations." Here you will find feminist theory, postcolonial theory, cultural imperialism, nonviolence, and media policy discussed. You will also find cultivation theory applied in new contexts, and a discussion of globalization and cultural identity.

Part IV is devoted to new technologies. There are chapters on the philosophy of technology and perspectives on its social construction. Social networking, video games, the communication divide, consumption of media with an emphasis on Twitter, and the Internet are all the focus of chapters here.

The fifth part provides case studies from a variety of countries, as well as paying attention to theory development from different religious traditions.

The last part is the shortest: only one chapter. Here is where we try to outline what we think might be future directions for mass communication and media

theory. We could be wrong, of course, as prognostication is a dangerous business. Our approach here is based on all that we have seen in the course of collecting, reading, and editing the fifty or so chapters in this reference book. There is still much work to be done – on virtually all the theoretical concepts covered here. We hope these two volumes can contribute to the worldwide conversation about a rich field for study.

Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler

Part 1

Classical Theories of Media and the Press

1

Classical Liberal Theory in a Digital World

Stephen J. A. Ward

The liberal theory of the press believes that news media should be free to report on public issues so that crucial features of liberal society can be maintained, for example the protection of rights such as free speech, or the monitoring of abuses of power. Some theories of the press, such as the authoritarian view, reject the priority of a free press. Others, for instance a communitarian approach, may support the idea of a free press while placing equal, if not greater, stress on other values, such as the creation of community and social solidarity. The liberal theory distinguishes itself, historically and doctrinally, through its enthusiasm for the freedom to speak and to publish. In many cases where press behavior is in question, the liberal theory argues that the freedom to publish trumps other values.[1]

What is "classical" liberal theory, then? Classical liberal theory is libertarian press theory as developed in the nineteenth century. It is "classical" by virtue of being the original liberal theory. Libertarian press theory was the first explicit formulation of liberalism's view of the role of the press in society. In time, other formulations of liberal theory were constructed, until "liberal theory" came to refer to a variety of positions, as it does today. All these positions place emphasis on a free press but differ on the amount of freedom required and on the extent to which other values, such as minimizing harm, should ethically restrain the freedom to publish.

This chapter probes into classical liberal theory by describing its origins and by comparing it with later forms of liberal theory. It also considers its theoretical adequacy today and the question of the form of liberal theory that is most relevant to current discussions about news media.

I begin by outlining the history of the Western free press. I discuss the enthusiasm, among many liberals, for a libertarian press in the 1800s and the subsequent

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disillusionment with libertarian theory as the power of the press grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I explain how disillusionment gave birth to modern journalism ethics and to variations on the liberal theory.

I conclude that the best form of liberal theory today is a theory that takes the promotion of deliberative democracy in pluralistic democracies as its guiding aim. I argue that neither the classical liberal theory nor current neolibertarian approaches constitute an adequate theory, because none of these makes deliberative journalism its primary aim.

Origins and Optimism

Challenging the authoritarian system

The history of the Western press has been the subject of many publications, and I have traced the history of journalism ethics (Ward, 2005). Therefore this chapter will not duplicate earlier efforts. Instead I will only outline the main stages that lead to the liberal theory of the press.[2]

This history can be divided into the following stages: (1) seventeenth century: challenge to the authoritarian theory of the press; (2) eighteenth century: creation of a "public" press – a fourth estate that represents the public; (3) nineteenth century: development of a liberal press theory of a libertarian cast; (4) twentieth century to the present: criticism of the libertarian theory, leading to variations in liberal theory and to alternate views.

The seventeenth century is important for understanding the origins of liberal theory because in this period we witness a challenge to the first "theory" of (or approach to) the fledgling periodic news press. This first theory or approach was the authoritarian view of the press, as embraced by monarchs, church officials, the military, and other elite groups. In the twentieth century the authoritarian view evolved into totalitarian and communist views of the press, which saw it as a vehicle of propaganda for the utopian societies envisaged by totalitarian and communist leaders and thinkers. For instance, Lenin regarded the press as a tool in the service of the Communist Party and its revolution and for the prevention of a counter-revolution. Today the authoritarian view is enforced in many nondemocratic or marginally democratic countries such as China, Burma, and Iran.

The authoritarian approach was (and is) the opposite of the liberal theory of the press. The authoritarian view believes that the primary role of the press is to support authority – established power and, in many cases, a rigid, hierarchical society. The press exists not to serve a public, let alone a liberal public of free and equal citizens. It exists to serve the state, identified with a leader or an oligopoly whose aim is to exercise political power and to maintain law and order over "subjects" (not over citizens). On this view, uncensored or unregulated news publications are inherently dangerous to the stability of the state and are therefore regarded as going against the national interest. Publication is not a right of the citizens; it is a

privilege extended to publishers. Establishing who should publish and how is the prerogative of the authorities.

The challenge to this view began slowly. In the early 1600s printer-editors in Amsterdam, London, and other major centers experimented with selling news to the public. They did so carefully, in full view of kings and censors. Gradually editors became bolder. Journalists, originally in England and then in parts of Europe and the United States, began to agitate against the authoritarian system. These pioneering editors should not be confused with the professional and impartial journalists of modern news organizations. They were an eclectic group of religious dissidents, reformist editors, entrepreneurial publishers, government officials, and academics (Ward, 2005, pp. 89–127). Many took up journalism to advance their ideas and their group. Some published illegal broadsheets to challenge absolute monarchs or an established church. Nor were these publishers watchdogs for liberal society. Liberal society did not exist. Liberals did not exist. Many of the early journalists, despite their fiery views, were traditionalists or conservatives.

The authoritarian system was weakened by a two-fold development – a decline in absolute government and the inability of officials to stem the tide of new publications, which in turn stimulated public demand for more publications. It was in England that this weakening of authoritarian control went furthest. A freer English press emerged at times of political turmoil – such as the collapse of central authority during the English Civil War and the periods of strong opposition to the Stuart monarchy. In 1695 the English Parliament allowed the Printing Act to expire. England became the first country in Europe to end the system of licensing (and prior censorship) of the press.

The end of press licensing allowed the newspaper to become a medium for the public sphere emerging with the Enlightenment (Ward, 2005, pp. 128–173). There was in practice an explosion of new types of newspapers in London and across Britain. This freedom was not matched across the Channel, where the press continued to labor under absolute government and strict press controls. Yet in Enlightenment France, for example, monarchs could not repress the growth of papers and journals, although they attempted to control it. No fewer than 1,267 periodic journals were established in France between 1600 and 1789, many dealing with scientific and artistic matters (Burke, 2000, pp. 47–48).

The eighteenth-century idea that newspapers addressed an autonomous "public" and helped to create public opinion – an opinion designed to guide and restrict government – was a new challenge to the authoritarian view. Newspapers claimed to be "tribunes" of the public, and by this they were referring to the Roman tribunes, who spoke for the people. The philosophy of a free press was forged not in philosophy books but in the writings of audacious journalists, in judgments of jurists, in famous conflicts between editors and government, and in the philosophical writings of Hume, Jefferson, Erskine, and Condorcet.

In England, from 1720 to 1723, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon published anonymously, in the *London Journal*, the famous 144 "Cato" letters that railed against "wicked ministers" who "enslave their country." On February 4, 1720,

the fifteenth "Cato" letter presented its famous argument that freedom of the press was "inseparable from public liberty" (Ward, 2005, pp. 152–153). Cato's arguments, republished in the American colonies by Benjamin Franklin, played a role in the 1735 acquittal of John Peter Zenger for criticizing the governor of New York. From the 1760s onward, the clearest demands for freedom to publish come from a new generation of journalists pushing for more far-reaching reform and, in some cases, revolution. The press was aligned against a common enemy: corrupt, unrepresentative, and tyrannical government. In America, Tom Paine campaigned for the "rights of man" and the American Revolution. In England, the liberty of the press was a central issue in the infamous clashes between an unpopular Hanover monarchy and John Wilkes, MP and editor of the London weekly *The North Briton* (Ward, 2005, p. 157). Eventually this freer press played major roles in the American and French revolutions. After the revolutions, the right to free expression and to a free press was made part of the constitutions of America and France.

The start of the nineteenth century, however, seemed to roll back these victories for the press. Napoleon swept across Europe and reinstituted press controls. However, the struggles of the press were part of the liberal movements that sparked revolutions across Europe in 1848 and beyond. By the end of the nineteenth century a substantial "negative liberty" of the press – the right not to be interfered with – would be achieved across most of Europe and North America. In country after country, post-publication press controls and crippling taxes on newspapers were reduced and more liberal societies were established. By the end of the nineteenth century the Western press as a whole could be properly described as a free press.

A libertarian press

The "liberty of the press" was therefore central to debates about the role of the eighteenth-century public press. However, the theory of a fourth-estate "public" press is not the same as the nineteenth-century conception of the press as an agent of liberalism. Two things were missing. First, what was missing was an explicit (and widely accepted) liberal view of society – that is, the notion of a society that exists so that individuals may flourish, and of a society that takes its main duty to be the protection of basic liberties, regarding them as essential to human flourishing. Second, what was missing was the concept of a liberal (or libertarian) press. A libertarian press was not just a relatively free press, but a *maximally* free press. Only in the nineteenth century, with the development of liberalism, did both ideas come to dominate thinking on the press and society. Liberal theory transformed the eighteenth-century idea of a press that represents the public into a more specific and more demanding one: the idea of a maximally free press where liberal views could be advanced.

Libertarian press theory was an extension of liberalism to the press (Siebert, 1956). In economics, liberalism supported the policy of *laissez faire* – a free economic marketplace without excessive government interference. Liberalism also