

Revisions of the "Four Theories of the Press" Model

Robert G. Picard

For a quarter of a century the dominant model in the United States for studying the relationship between the state and the press has been Four Theories of the Press,¹ which asserts that the relationships of states and media throughout the world can be explained by the libertarian, authoritarian, Soviet communist, and social responsibility theories. In recent years criticism of these categories has arisen because they are not well-defined enough to cover conditions that exist in much of the world, especially in developing countries.

These problems are not surprising because the model was developed during the Cold War by three U.S. researchers who approached their task of exploring state-press relations with a bias toward the liberal democratic tradition and its Anglo-American evolution. Their work thus favored the Western-oriented libertarian and social responsibility approaches, and rejected the authoritarian and Soviet communist theories. Although the beginnings of the non-aligned and nationalist movements were clearly visible in the Third World when Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm wrote their seminal work, it generally ignored the Third World.

Even the most cursory review of the theories reveals the inadequacy of the model today. The authoritarian theory that emphasizes the absolute right of ruling monarchs or government to use and control the press to maintain power and social stability is practiced only in some nations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia with strong governments headed by dictators and monarchs. The communist theory that asserts the press is a tool for the party or government to use for social improvement and other policy objectives is found predominantly in Eastern Europe, China, and a few communist nations in the Third World. The libertarian theory that places an unrepressed,

privately owned press in opposition to government, and the social responsibility approach that champions a self-regulating, privately controlled press, are found mainly in Western nations or other advanced democratic nations fashioned on Western ideologies.

Most developing nations are attempting to pursue state policies that combine some elements of a free press system with one that enforces press responsibility. They must cope with a dearth of media caused by economic considerations that have kept private owners out of the marketplace of ideas and information. The press policy approach selected by such nations is often outside the traditional four theories model. In the West, too, the four theories have not accounted for attempts to enforce social accountability in the media or the proliferation of state operated, supplemental media, a limitation that also points out steps toward modifying the existing model.

When the four theories model was presented in 1956, it was greeted as an interesting proposition, but widespread acceptance did not occur until the 1960s. Even then, however, the typology was subjected to criticism. Much of the debate was sparked by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's articulation of the social responsibility theory, which critics argued was only an observation of what the relationship between the press and state could be rather than an explanation of existing situations. Even the authors were not certain the social responsibility approach represented a theory. As late as 1969, Wilbur Schramm called it a "premise," an indication of the conflict surrounding the concept.²

The major criticism of the social responsibility approach was noted in 1967 by Jan Robbins, who argued that this approach is not really different from the libertarian theory, but merely tempers the philosophical assumptions of libertarianism by including allusions to the personal obligations of classical liberal rights.³

Robert G. Picard is on the journalism faculty at Louisiana State University.

Nevertheless, acceptance of the four theories model became nearly universal in the communication community in the United States by the 1970s. *Four Theories of the Press* became standard reading in journalism programs and nearly every mass media and communication philosophy text incorporated the concept, but it was only occasionally evaluated critically. One critic of the model has noted the widespread allegiance to the four theories model and the difficulty of offering other views, saying, "One doesn't blaspheme the trinity of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in the presence of knee-jerk worshippers without risking their wrath."⁴

The support for the model can probably be explained by the long-standing need for a theory of state-press relations and by the desire to bolster communication studies with theoretical propositions, a strong feature of social science research.

Reformations

Despite nearly catholic acceptance of the four theories, criticism mounted, and the first major modification was proposed by Ralph Lowenstein in 1971. Lowenstein argued that there are really only two major approaches to state-press relations, authoritarian-tending and libertarian-tending relations, and that all governments are inclined to one or the other direction.

Men, as well as nations, tend to be authoritarian or libertarian. Of course, they are all somewhat schizophrenic, but basically they are disposed toward either a well-structured, disciplined world view with definite rules and an ordered society, or they are disposed toward an open, experimental, nonrestrictive society with a minimum of rules and controls. Governments are designed on the philosophical base of one of these two basic orientations.⁵

He then proposed a model that includes the traditional authoritarian and libertarian theories but added a social-centralist theory to account for communist and developing world approaches and a social-libertarian theory to replace the social responsibility approach.

While Lowenstein's modifications better approximated the realities of the modern world, they were never widely accepted, perhaps because the social-centralist theory did not appear broad enough to cover all communist and developing world approaches to press policy. His major contribution, however, was the argument that the four theories lacked flexibility for description and analysis of all nations and his proposal of a bi-directional model.

By 1980, the rapid multiplication of independent nations in the developing world and increasing state intervention in press affairs in the Western world had underscored the inadequacies of the four press theories and the need to alter the model. Clyde Slade asserted that the social responsibility approach, which depended on press self-restraint, seemed ready to evolve into a new press theory stressing social accountability and official action to enforce it.⁶

In his criticism of the corporate press, directed mainly at the U.S. media, Slade said the public might soon force government to act against the press to ensure that social needs were met. "Corporate newspapers stand at the crossroad. They can either choose to change to meet society's needs or await the consequences as society forces them to return to a status of social significance. They can no longer maintain the status quo," he said.⁷

William Hachten shortly thereafter postulated a replacement model for the four theories approach, and his typology offers a more realistic view of the existing world and state relations with the press. In his model, Hachten offers five political concepts of the press: authoritarian, communist, Western, revolutionary, and developmental.⁸

The authoritarian and communist theories are borrowed from *Four Theories of the Press*, as is the Western theory that Hachten created by combining the libertarian and social responsibility approaches under a unified heading. He argues that both concepts developed first in the West and represent two different-but particularly Western-points of view. Hachten then proposes the revolutionary and developmental theories, views of state-press relations that had been generally ignored in the past. The former covers the use of the press by revolutionary groups and the latter provides a perspective for using the media for developmental purposes.

Under the revolutionary theory, the press operates outside traditional state-press relationships, supporting efforts to overthrow the existing government or free the state from foreign domination. This is clearly a transitional theory, operative only until the subversion is successful or fails. In the world of the 1980s, the revolutionary theory is seen mainly in the Third World.

"The revolutionary press is a press of people who believe strongly that the government they live under does not serve their interests and should be overthrown. They owe the government no loyalty," Hachten said.⁹

The dominant successor to the revolutionary press theory of modern nationalist and political

independence movements has been the developmental theory of the press. Its theoretical foundations are a combination of socialist thought and developmental principles, particularly the principles of utilizing communication media to promote development as suggested by individuals such as Daniel Lerner, Lucien Pye, and Wilbur Schramm. Under this theory, media are used to help promote social and economic development and achieve national integration. Like the revolutionary theory, this developmental theory is probably transitional but operative in a longer term than the revolutionary theory. The ultimate direction of the nations practicing this form of press-state relations may be either libertarian-tending or authoritarian-tending.

"The Developmental concept is a view of mass communication from the many nations of the Third World where most people are colored, poor, ill-nourished, and illiterate, and it reflects resentments against the West where people are mainly Caucasians..., affluent, and literate." Hachten explains.¹⁰

Increasing state intervention in press economics in Western nations, until recently presumed to be operating under the libertarian and social responsibility approaches, has also prompted reconsideration of state-press relations. Out of this reconsideration has developed the recognition that the libertarian and social responsibility theories have failed to provide answers to the problems posed by increasing economic control of the marketplace for ideas or the responses to such ideas. Several European nations, particularly those in Scandinavia, have witnessed this phenomenon.

A major premise of Anglo-American libertarianism has been that transition from state market control to commercial market control ended press subservience to government and thus bolstered freedom. But economic developments in the press during the twentieth century--especially since the Second World War--have made it clear that the press can become subservient to market forces that also can restrict freedom.

Proponents of the social responsibility view recognized the problems of monopolization and declining diversity and participation in the press. While they offered no real solutions except the advice that media should behave more responsibly, they warned that if members of the media did not deal with the issues themselves, other institutions of society, notably the state apparatus, would step in to rectify the situation. The Commission on Freedom of the Press observed:

No democracy...will indefinitely tolerate concentration of private power irresponsible and strong enough to thwart the aspirations of the people. Eventually governmental power will be used to break up private power, or governmental power will be used to regulate private power.¹¹

In response to the recent problems of the media, a new view of press-state relations has risen quietly that places great significance on preserving diversity of ideas and allows the state to take action to preserve and promote the role of the press in the democratic process. This new view has emerged from European democratic socialist ideology and has begun spreading throughout the democratic world in the decades since the Second World War. Its main proponents are found in Scandinavia.¹²

Like the social responsibility theory, this democratic socialist theory of the press requires media to open avenues for expression of diverse ideas and opinions. But it goes further than the social responsibility theory because it views the dangers of private control of an institution vital to society as so potentially damaging that they must be ameliorated by state action to institute new forms of ownership, operation, and management of the media, and significant state intervention in the economics of the press. This is the step beyond the social responsibility theory that the Hutchins Commission predicted in the late 1940s and that Clyde Slade suggested was beginning to occur in the United States vis-a-vis social accountability in 1980.

Under the democratic socialist approach, the press' purpose is clearly libertarian-tending. The functions of the press are to provide an avenue for expression of views by the public and to fuel the political and social debates necessary for the continued development of democratic governance. Under such an approach, the state takes action to ensure the ability of citizens to use the press and to preserve and promote media plurality. Ultimately, ownership under such a system would be public and not-for-profit, through foundations, non-profit corporations, journalist-operated cooperatives, and other collective organizations.

The democratic socialist theory of the press has been drawn from suggestions for improving the press that have been offered by a wide variety of individuals with a wide range of ideological backgrounds. It incorporates libertarian, liberal, and socialist views of press freedom. While it draws its various aspects from a wide range of Western viewpoints, it is a distinctly socialist approach when considered as a whole.

It is a significantly different view of the press than that offered by the traditional theories of the press. Under democratic socialist theory, the media are not instruments for private owners--as they are under the libertarian and social responsibility theories, and can be under the authoritarian theory--or of the state or party--as they are under the Soviet communist and authoritarian theories of the press. Instead, under democratic socialist theory, media are viewed as instruments of the people, public utilities through which their aspirations, ideas, and criticisms of the state and society may be disseminated.

The democratic socialist approach lies somewhere between the social responsibility approach and developmental theory in its view of state-press relations. The approach is built upon the view that society leans heavily upon media in its efforts to meet social needs and that the state may need to ensure those needs are met.

In terms of theories of state-press relations, the democratic socialist theory takes a place beside the libertarian and social responsibility approaches, under the Western theory suggested by William Hachten. If one reviews the five theories and subordinated approaches in terms of Lowenstein's authoritarian-tending and libertarian-tending paradigm, it immediately becomes clear that his view must be modified to include a region in which the direction is unclear. This occurs because the revolutionary and developmental concepts of the press can be either authoritarian- or libertarian-tending, depending upon the circumstances under which they are pursued.

A synthesis of these revisions to the four theories reveals a hybrid model based on five theories, with subordinated approaches, that are either libertarian- or authoritarian-tending.

Discussion

Typologies present difficulties for social scientists because they must constantly be reevaluated to reflect the changing realities of the world. The reformations of the four theories model presented here are not the final revisions to theories of the press. It seems clear that the developmental process in the Third World will provide subordinate approaches to the developmental theory, just as the Western theory includes separate and distinct approaches. Further research on the authoritarian, communist, and revolutionary theories will undoubtedly reveal subtleties that will require refinement of those concepts as well.

Despite the inadequacies of the four theories of the press typology, that model continues to appear in the standard texts of mass media today and the majority of journalism students are being taught the model as part of the gospel of journalism education. While many faculty members critically evaluate the media in their courses, few are equally critical of the four theories model and thus color perceptions of state-press relations worldwide by the presentation of a deficient model. Only by continually reevaluating and reformulating such models can communication educators begin to present more realistic views of the world in which the press exists. The reformations represented here offer a clearer view of existing state-press relations than those currently accepted and may help foster a better understanding of communication systems that exist throughout the world.

Notes

1. Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).
2. William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, *Responsibility in Mass Communication*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969): 52.
3. Jan C. Robbins, "The Paradox of Press Freedom: A Study of the British Experience," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (Autumn 1967): 429.
4. Jack Haberstroh, "Should Fourth Press Theory Really be Called 'Make-a-Buck'?" *Journalism Educator* (April 1972): 9.
5. John C. Merrill and Ralph L. Lowenstein, *Media, Messages, and Men* (New York: David McKay, 1971): 175.
6. Clyde M. Slade, "Daily Newspapers and Social Accountability," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 5 (Winter 1980): 43-53.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
8. William Hachten, *The World News Prism: Changing Media, Clashing Ideologies* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1981).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
11. Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947): 80.
12. See Robert G. Picard, "Democratic Socialism: Toward a Fifth Theory of the Press." A paper presented to the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism, Ohio University, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982, and Robert G. Picard, "The Democratic Socialist Hierarchy of Press Freedom Needs," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1982): 77-88.