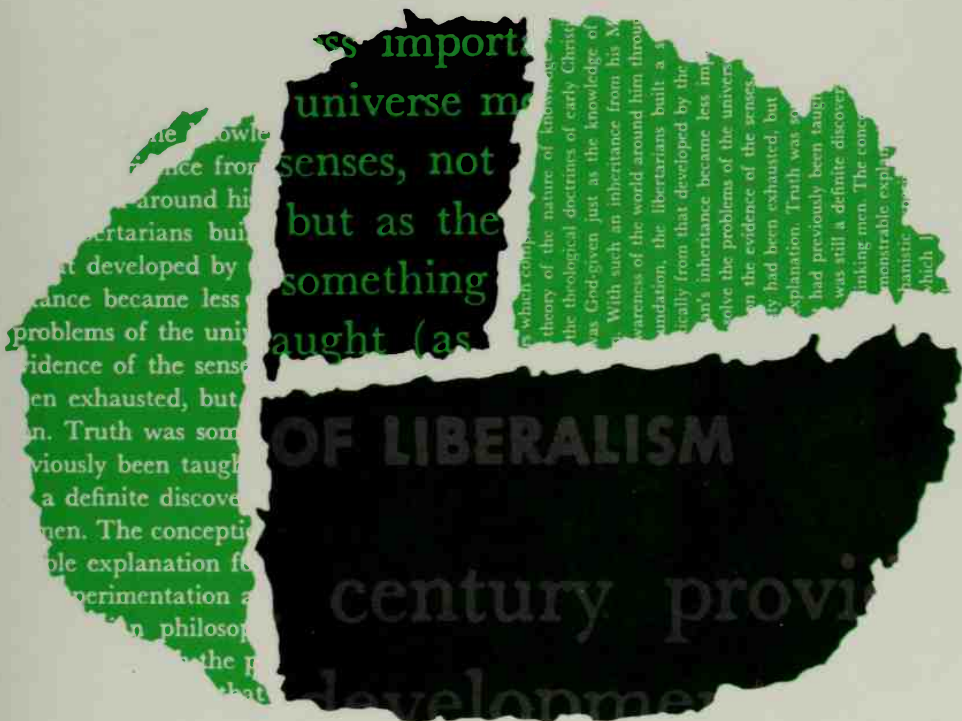


# FOUR THEORIES OF THE PRESS



THE AUTHORITARIAN, LIBERTARIAN, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND  
SOVIET COMMUNIST CONCEPTS OF WHAT THE PRESS SHOULD BE AND DO

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## INTRODUCTION

By *press*, in this book, we mean all the media of mass communication, although we shall talk about the printed media oftener than about broadcast or film because the printed media are older and have gathered about them more of the theory and philosophy of mass communication.

In simplest terms the question behind this book is, why is the press as it is? Why does it apparently serve different purposes and appear in widely different forms in different countries? Why, for example, is the press of the Soviet Union so different from our own, and the press of Argentina so different from that of Great Britain?

Partly, of course, these differences reflect the ability of a country to pay for its press, the mechanical ingenuity and resources that can be put behind mass communication, and the relative degree of urbanization which makes the circulation of mass media at once easier and more necessary. Partly, the differences in the press of different countries reflect simply what people do in different places and what their experience leads them to want to read about.

But there is a more basic and important reason for these differences. The thesis of this volume is that 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. We believe that an understanding of these aspects of society is basic to any systematic understanding of the press.

To see the differences between press systems in full perspective, then, one must look at the social systems in which the press functions. 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: the nature of man, the nature of society and the state, the relation of man to the state, and the nature of knowledge and truth. Thus, in the last analysis the difference between press systems is one of philosophy, and this book is about the philosophical and political rationales or theories which lie behind the different kinds of press we have in the world today.

Since the beginning of mass communication, in the Renaissance, there have been only two or four basic theories of the press — two or four, that is, according to how one counts them. We have written four essays about them, but have tried to make clear that the latter two “theories” are merely developments and modifications of the first two. The *Soviet Communist* theory is only a development of the much older *Authoritarian* theory, and what we have called the *Social Responsibility* theory is only a modification of the *Libertarian* theory. But because the Soviets have produced something so spectacularly different from older authoritarianism, and something so important to the world today, and because the social responsibility theory road is the apparent direction of development which our own press is now taking, we have thought it better to treat them as four separate theories, meanwhile trying to point out their relationships.

The oldest of these theories is the Authoritarian. It came into being in the authoritarian climate of the late Renaissance, soon after the invention of printing. In that society, truth was conceived to be, not the product of the great mass of people, but of a few wise men who were in a position to guide and direct their fellows. Thus truth was thought to be centered near the center of power. The press therefore functioned *from the top down*. The rulers of the time used the press to inform the people of what the rulers thought they should know and the policies the rulers thought they should support. The Tudors and Stuarts maintained that the press belonged to the office of king and therefore was obligated to support the royal policy. Only by special permission was private ownership of the press permitted, and this



*prior restraint*

permission could be withdrawn any time the obligation to support the royal policies was considered to have been dishonored. Publishing was thus a sort of agreement between power source and publisher, in which the former granted a monopoly right and the latter gave support. But the power source kept the right to set and change policy, the right to license, and in some cases the right to censor. It is obvious that this concept of the press eliminated what has come in our own time to be one of the most common press functions: to check on government.

This theory of the press — the press being a servant of the state responsible for much of its content to the power figures in charge of government at any given moment — was universally accepted in the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth centuries. This concept set the original pattern for most of the national press systems of the world, and still persists. Indeed, as the following chapters will make clear, authoritarian practice is still found to some extent in all parts of the world even though another theory has been accepted, in word if not in deed, by most of the non-Communist nations. But the growth of political democracy and religious freedom, the expansion of free trade and travel, the acceptance of laissez-faire economics, and the general philosophical climate of the Enlightenment, undermined authoritarianism and called for a new concept of the press. This new theory, which was incipient in the late seventeenth century, came into real being in the eighteenth, and flowered in the nineteenth, is what we have called the *Libertarian* theory.

The Libertarian theory reverses the relative position of man and the state as we saw it in the Authoritarian theory. Man is no longer conceived of as a dependent being to be led and directed, but rather as a rational being able to discern between truth and falsehood, between a better and worse alternative, when faced with conflicting evidence and alternative choices. Truth is no longer conceived of as the property of power. Rather, the right to search for truth is one of the inalienable natural rights of man. And where does the press fit into the scheme? The press is conceived of as a partner in the search for truth.

In Libertarian theory, the press is not an instrument of government, but rather a device for presenting evidence and arguments on the basis of which the people can check on government and make up their minds as to policy. Therefore, it is imperative that the press be free from government control and influence. In order for truth to emerge, all ideas must get a fair hearing; there must be a "free market place"

of ideas and information. Minorities as well as majorities, the weak as well as the strong, must have access to the press. This is the theory of the press which was written into our Bill of Rights.

For two hundred years the United States and Great Britain have maintained this kind of press, almost wholly free of government influence and encouraged to serve as a "Fourth Estate" in the governing process. As we indicated earlier, most other non-Communist countries have given at least lip service to the Libertarian theory of the press. But in our own century there have been currents of change. These currents have taken the form of a new authoritarianism in the Communist countries and a trend toward a new Libertarianism in the non-Communist countries. It is the second of these that we have called, for want of a better name, the *Social Responsibility* theory.

The new Libertarianism received wide publicity in connection with the reports of the Hutchins Commission, but the theory was reflected much earlier by editors and publishers themselves. These men realized that twentieth-century conditions demand of the mass media a new and different kind of social responsibility. This realization came about the time that people began to measure and assess the "communication revolution" through which they were passing.

It was apparent thirty years ago that it was no longer easy to enter the publishing business or to operate a newspaper or a radio station. As these units grew large, their ownership and management came to involve huge amounts of money. No longer was the typical pattern a multiplicity of small media units representing different political viewpoints, from which the reader could select. Now, less than seven per cent of the daily newspaper towns of the United States have competing ownership in the dailies. Three television, four radio networks, three wire services, shape a large part of the information that goes into the American home. In other words the press, as in the old authoritarian days, is falling into the hands of a powerful few. It is true that these new rulers of the press are not, for the most part, political rulers. As a matter of fact, they rigorously protect the press against government. But the very fact that control of the press is so limited puts a new and uneasy power into the hands of media owners and managers. No longer is it easy for the press to be a free market place of ideas, as defined by Mill and Jefferson. As the Commission on Freedom of the Press said, "protection against government is not now enough to guarantee that a man who has something to say shall have a chance to

say it. The owners and managers of the press determine which persons, which facts, which versions of these facts, shall reach the public." This uneasiness is the basis of the developing Social Responsibility theory: that the power and near monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible, to see that all sides are fairly presented and that the public has enough information to decide; and that if the media do not take on themselves such responsibility it may be necessary for some other agency of the public to enforce it.

Let us say again that the Social Responsibility theory should not be thought of as an abstraction produced by the group of scholars who made up the Hutchins Commission. The theory has been so treated by some factions of the press with which the Hutchins Commission was in bad odor. But all the essentials of this theory were expressed by responsible editors and publishers long before the Commission, and have been stated by other responsible editors and publishers since and quite independently of the Commission. It is a trend, not an academic exercise.

While the Libertarian theory has been wrestling with its own problems and shaping its own destiny, a new and dramatic development of authoritarianism has arisen to challenge it. This is, of course, the *Soviet Communist* theory of the press. Grounded in Marxist determinism and in the harsh political necessity of maintaining the political ascendancy of a party which represents less than ten per cent of the country's people, the Soviet press operates as a tool of the ruling power just as clearly as did the older authoritarianism. Unlike the older pattern, it is state rather than privately owned. The profit motive has been removed, and a concept of positive has been substituted for a concept of negative liberty. Perhaps no press in the history of the world has ever been so tightly controlled, and yet the Soviet spokesmen think of their press as free because it is free to speak the "truth" as the Party sees the truth. The American press is not truly free, the Soviets say, because it is business controlled and therefore not free to speak the Marxist "truth." Thus the two systems line up almost diametrically opposite in their basic tenets, although both use words like freedom and responsibility to describe what they are doing. Our press tries to contribute to the search for truth; the Soviet press tries to convey pre-established Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist truth. We think of the audiences of our press as "rational men," able to choose between truth and falsehood; the Soviets think of theirs as needing careful guidance from caretakers, and to this end the Soviet state sets up the most complete

ed. communist



possible safeguards against competing information. We bend over backward to make sure that information and ideas will compete. They bend over backward to make sure that only the line decided upon will flow through the Soviet channels. We say that their press is not free; they say that our press is not responsible.

These are the four theories which have largely determined what kind of press the Western world has had: The Authoritarian theory grounded in centuries of authoritarian political thought from Plato to Machiavelli; the Libertarian, grounded in Milton, Locke, Mill and the Enlightenment; the Social Responsibility, grounded in a communication revolution and in certain behavioristic doubts about the philosophy of the Enlightenment; and the Soviet Communist, grounded in Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and the dictatorship of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. We shall take up these theories, one by one, in the following pages.

Each of the four chapters that follows represents the individual work, style, and opinion of its author. We have made no attempt to impose a majority viewpoint on any of the moot points discussed in these chapters, although we have talked over among ourselves our papers and our conclusions.

We shall begin, then, with the first theory in point of time, the Authoritarian.

## FOUR RATIONALES FOR THE MASS MEDIA

	AUTHORITARIAN	LIBERTARIAN	SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	SOVIET-TOTALITARIAN
Developed	in 16th and 17th century England; widely adopted and still practiced in many places	adopted by England after 1688, and in U.S.; influential elsewhere	in U.S. in the 20th century	in Soviet Union, although some of the same things were done by Nazis and Italians
Out of	philosophy of absolute power of monarch, his government, or both	writings of Milton, Locke, Mill, and general philosophy of rationalism and natural rights	writing of W. E. Hocking, Commission on Freedom of Press, and practitioners; media codes	Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist thought, with mixture of Hegel and 19th century Russian thinking
Chief purpose	to support and advance the policies of the government in power; and to service the state	to inform, entertain, sell — but chiefly to help discover truth, and to check on government	to inform, entertain, sell — but chiefly to raise conflict to the plane of discussion	to contribute to the success and continuance of the Soviet socialist system, and especially to the dictatorship of the party
Who has right to use media?	whoever gets a royal patent or similar permission	anyone with economic means to do so	everyone who has something to say	loyal and orthodox party members
How are media controlled?	government patents, guilds, licensing, sometimes censorship	by "self-righting process of truth" in "free market place of ideas," and by courts	community opinion, consumer action, professional ethics	surveillance and economic or political action of government
What forbidden?	criticism of political machinery and officials in power	defamation, obscenity, indecency, wartime sedition	serious invasion of recognized private rights and vital social interests	criticism of party objectives as distinguished from tactics
Ownership	private or public	chiefly private	private unless government has to take over to insure public service	public
Essential differences from others	instrument for effecting government policy, though not necessarily government owned	instrument for checking on government and meeting other needs of society	media must assume obligation of social responsibility; and if they do not, someone must see that they do	state-owned and closely controlled media existing solely as arm of state