

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

WEEK FIVE: The Four Theories of the PRESS. The role of the four theories in Africa communication

In this lecture we will use the Four Theories of Press to explain the different media systems. The four theories are: The Authoritarian Theory, The Libertarian Theory, Soviet-Communist Theory, and Social-Responsibility Theory. Finally the lecture will analyze the role of the four theories in Africa's communication and media systems.

Learning Outcomes



1. Define the Four Theories of Press
2. Explain the functions of the Four Theories of Press
3. Analyze the role of the Four Theories of Press in the Africa communication and media systems.

THE FOUR THEORIES OF THE PRESS DEFINED

In simplest terms the question behind this lecture is, why is the press as it is? Why does it apparently serve different purposes and appear in widely different forms in different countries? According to Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schram in 1956, the following are the theories to answer these questions:

1 THE AUTHORITARIAN THEORY OF THE PRESS (pp. 9-38)

FRED S. SIEBERT

Of the four theories of the relation of the press to society or to government, the authoritarian has been most pervasive both historically and geographically. It is the theory which was almost automatically adopted by most countries when society and technology became sufficiently developed to produce what today we call the "mass media" of communication. It furnishes the basis for the press systems in many modern societies; even where it has been abandoned, it has continued to influence the practices of a number of governments which theoretically adhere to libertarian principles.

2 THE LIBERTARIAN THEORY OF THE PRESS (pp. 39-72)

FRED S. SIEBERT

Like other theories of the status and function of the mass media of communication in society, the libertarian doctrine is a development of the philosophical principles which provide the basis for the social and political structure within which the media operate. Liberalism, as a social and political system, has a set framework for the institutions which function within its orbit, and the press, like other institutions, is conditioned by the principles underlying the society of which it is a part.

For the last century, a large part of the civilized world has professed to adhere to the principles of liberalism...(Liberalism is a political and economic doctrine that emphasizes individual autonomy, equality of opportunity, and the protection of individual rights)

3 THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY OF THE PRESS (pp. 73-104)

THEODORE PETERSON

Today, when newspaper publishers speak about their calling, such phrases as “the public’s right to know” and “the public responsibility of the press” are likely to creep into their talk. Such ideas and the press performance resulting from them represent an important modification of traditional libertarian theory, for nothing in libertarian theory established the public’s right to information or required the publisher to assume moral responsibilities. A fairly valid expression of the publisher’s position under libertarian theory was that attributed to William Peter Hamilton of the Wall Street Journal: “A newspaper is a private enterprise owing nothing whatever to the... (...whatsoever to the public, which grants it no franchise. It is therefore affected with no public interest.)

4 THE SOVIET COMMUNIST THEORY OF THE PRESS (pp. 105-146)

WILBUR SCHRAMM

On the rare occasions when United States and Soviet newspapermen come together to discuss mass communication, the talk is apt to be both amusing and frustrating; for it becomes obvious in the first few minutes that the two frames of reference are incompatible. The American feels blessed with his free press, and is inclined to sympathize with his Soviet colleague who groans under state ownership, censorship, and propaganda. The Soviet representative, on the other hand, claims that he is blessed

with the only true freedom of the press, whereas his unfortunate American colleague is compelled to serve a press that... (... is supposed to serve him)

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE FOUR THEORIES OF THE PRESS

We will use the Four Theories of Press to explain their functions in different media systems. The four theories are: The Authoritarian Theory, The Libertarian Theory, Soviet-Communist Theory, and Social-Responsibility Theory. The press in any society is a reflection of the society and its norms and therefore will more often than not "... take on the form of the social and political structures of the environment within which it operates" (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956, pp. 1-2).

Normative theories were first proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called "Four Theories of the Press". At first the word "Normative Theory" was pronounced in USA during the height of 'cold war' with communism and soviet. Often called as western theories of mass media (Wamoyi, 2017).

A Normative theory describes an ideal way for a media system to be controlled and operated by the government, authority, leader and public. These theories are basically different from other communication theories because normative theories of press are not providing any scientific explanations or prediction. At the same time these "four theories of the press" came from many sources rather than a single source. Sometimes media practitioners, social critics and academics also are involved to develop these normative theories (Wamoyi, 2017).

Normative theories are more focused in the relationship between Press and the Government than press and the audience. These theories are more concerned about the ownership of the media and who controls the press or media in the country. Generally, though, the four normative theories have been seen as being too idealistic. Hence, Dennis McQuail (1994), in his book *Mass Communication Theory; An Introduction*, described Siebert's theories as biased and he developed two additional theories to accommodate the loopholes in the four basic theories. He proposed a category of the four based on liberal pluralist, professional, alternative media and the public interest models (Wamoyi, 2017).

The two theories are;

- ❖ *Development Concept of the Press (Development Press Theory)*
- ❖ *Democratic Participant Press Theory*

1. Authoritarian Theory: This theory according to Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (page 576) was developed in England and exemplified by the monarchies of medieval Europe based on the philosophical foundations not only of divinerights of Kings and Queens to rule, but as a source of truth. Here the unquestionable supremacy of the rulers over the ruled is upheld.

The authoritarian theory developed between the sixteenth and seventeenth century in England and it is widely adopted and still practiced in many places. According to Siebert (1984), the authoritarian theory requires direct governmental control of the mass media. This system is especially easy to recognize in pre-democratic societies, where the government consists of a very limited and small ruling-class.

The media in authoritarian system are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority, and any offense against the existing political values is avoided. The authoritarian government may go the length of punishing anyone who questions the states ideology (Wamoyi, 2017).

Government control over the press content is often meted out arbitrarily and erratically but often includes a requirement that publishers be officially licensed by the state.

The Fundamental assumptions of this theory system are:

- Media are not allowed to enjoy independence.
- There must be the perfect government.
- The Media is controlled by the Government by using different techniques of licensing, censorship and imprisonment.
- Foreign media are subordinate to the established authority, in that all imported media products are controlled by the state.
- The Countries which are non- democratic are still following the theory (Wamoyi, 2017).

Countries practicing Authoritarian model

Nowadays, this theory is still functioning in the non- democratic countries. Most of the non-democratic countries like Latin America, Africa, and Asia follows this theory. A state that comes close to this media system today is China, Myanmar and Saudi Arabia – countries whose governmental bodies restrict citizens’ access to external news sources that appear to pose a threat to their authority.

Westerners’ criticism of such policies reveals a normative assumption that all nation states should adopt a Libertarian orientation towards their oversight of new media. (Wamoyi, 2017).

2. Libertarian Theory: The Libertarian system stresses the need for an open market place of ideas which rest on the assumption that citizens can express their ideas without any fear of molestation. The media within this theory are free to carry out their traditional functions of reporting without harassment (as obtainable in the authoritarian theory).

The Libertarian Theory, also known as **the Free Press Theory**, was adopted by England after 1688 and in the U.S.A. Again, according to Siebert (1984), the libertarian view rests on the idea that the individual should be free to publish whatever he or she likes. Its history traces back to the seventeenth century’s thinker John Milton in *Aeropagitica* 1644tract, who asserted that in a fair, open and unregulated debate, good and truthful arguments would win out over lies (Wamoyi, 2017). Also, human beings inevitably choose the best ideas and values. (It should furthermore be noted that this theory is also based on the writing of Locke, Mill and general philosophy or rationalism and natural rights).

In the libertarian system, attacks on the government’s policies are fully accepted and even encouraged. Also, there should be no restrictions on import or export of media messages across the national frontiers. Moreover, journalists and media professionals ought to have full autonomy within the media organization. There is also no explicit connection between the government and the media in the libertarian theory.

The Fundamental assumptions of the Free Press Theory are:

- The Free press theory is found in most of the democratic countries.
- Journalists should have full autonomy.

- There should not be any restriction on import and export of media messages.
- The criticism of the government's policies is accepted and encouraged.

The Practice of Libertarian Theory

This is practiced by the American Press and media in France. CNN has continuously critiqued and criticized Trump and his administration thanks to this theory but the much Trump has done is to resort to social media for counter accusations. Libertarian in Anglo- American world inspired theories of Press Freedom as seen in political writings of Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill. We have self-righting theory by Milton and 18th c economist Adam Smith of Invisible hand in a consumer's market have a significant contribution to Libertarian Theory (Wamoyi, 2017).

In the USA, Libertarianism is enshrined in the constitution's first Amendment which promises that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of the speech or press. There is also restriction where the government forbids press from publishing information that threatens national security or reveals troops movement during time of war.

The fourth Estate notion

Theoretical outgrowth of Libertarian to the 18th Century is still alive to date with the notion of the press as the fourth Estate. In the USA the press is assumed to occupy the fourth estate after Executive, Legislative and Judiciary Estates while in London after Lords, Church and Commons.

Most countries view the media in this context Kenya included.

- 3. Social Responsibility Theory:** This theory is based on the writings of Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press and practitioners established in 1942 in response to growing sentiments that journalism was incapable of regulating itself. It is an extension of the libertarian theory that arose because the free market (Capitalism) had failed to fulfill the promise of press freedom, and to deliver its expected benefits (Wamoyi, 2017).

The theory holds that freedom comes with great responsibility. That although the press is free, it must be held accountable and responsible in fulfilling its ideal obligations to the society. Also, that the press must be checked to curb excesses and unruliness, to maintain

sanity in the media and protect the rights of members of the public. Most countries in Europe practice this system (Wamoyi, 2017).

The Commission on Freedom of the Press provided a model in which the media had certain obligations to society. These obligations were expressed in the words "informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance." Siebert writes that the goal of the social responsibility system is that media as a whole is pluralized, indicating "a reflection of the diversity of society as well as access to various points of view."

The assumptions of the theory are:

- Media has some obligations to society.
- This theory was developed under US initiative in the forties.
- Media is for minority groups.
- Journalists are accountable to their audience as well as the government (Wamoyi, 2017).

4. Soviet-Communist Theory: Apparent from its name, the Soviet theory is closely tied to a specific ideology; Communism. Siebert traces the roots of this theory back to the 1917 Russian Revolution based on the postulates of Marx and Engels. The media organizations in this system were not intended to be privately owned and were to serve the interests of the working class. An illustration of the Soviet system would appear to be the same as the authoritarian model, in that both theories acknowledge the government as superior to the media institutions. Theorists refer to this theory as totalitarian. However, there is a major difference between the two theories that needs to be clarified: The mass media in the Soviet model are expected to be self-regulatory with regard to the content of their messages (Wamoyi, 2017).

Also, the Soviet theory differs from the authoritarian theory in that the media organizations have a certain responsibility to meet the wishes of their audience. Still, the underlying standard is to provide a complete and objective view of the world according to Marxist-Leninist principles.

The fundamental assumptions of the theory are:

- There is the restriction of the private media organization.
- The media institution is junior than the government.

- Media serve the interests of the working class.
- The mass media must have self –regulatory (Wamoyi, 2017).

Current Examples

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Marxist-Leninist theory have survived in North Korea, Myanmar, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Cuba, Vietnam and to a certain extent in China, as most coherent, self-consciously elaborated examples.

China in September 2017 stopped all forms of digital broadcasting affecting the dominant British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC station that had operated in the country for nearly 40 years (Wamoyi, 2017).

Other Normative Theories under Post world war categorization

According to Wamoyi (2017), Mass communication theorist Dennis McQuail (1994) has proposed a slightly four-member group of normative theories to describe current press/ politics arrangement which are summarized into two major theories of development and democratic participant. His firstfour categories are:

- a) Liberal Pluralist Model: This is based on Libertarianism
- b) The public Interest Model: Based on Social Responsibility model
- c) The professional Model: Places regulatory responsibility on Media itself
- d) Alternative Media Model: Addresses non- main stream and digital media

Similar update by William Hachten who identifies 4 concepts in operation throughout theworld.

- Western Concept: US and the UK
- The Development Concept: Prevails in the industrializing nations of Africa, Asia, Former Soviet bloc, Latin America where government officials collaborate with Media to achieve societal and cultural needs.
- Revolutionary: Media is used in the service of revolutionary
- Authoritarian and Communism: Exhibited by complete government domination of the media (Wamoyi, 2017).

. **The two theories of McQuail based on the above categorization are :**

- 5. Development Press Theory:** As one of the theories propounded by McQuail, it sought to address the shortcomings of the four original Press theories as propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm. It arose because of the need to accommodate Third World Nations in the Press theories, because, as McQuail observed, these nations had peculiar climes and different socio-political systems that must be catered for.

Under this theory,

- ✓ The media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- ✓ Freedom of the press should be open to restriction according to economic priorities and development needs of society.
- ✓ Press should give priority in their content to the national culture and language.
- ✓ Journalists and other media professionals have both responsibilities and freedoms in their information gathering and dissemination tasks (Wamoyi, 2017).

- 6. Democratic- Participant Theory:** This theory argues against media monopoly and centralism, but that access should be given to as many that should rightfully have access to media and its technologies. According to McQuail (1994), this theory believes in horizontal rather than vertical communication. It proposes democratization of media and grassroots participation.

This theory also seeks to achieve the following;

- ❖ Focuses on the needs, interests and aspirations of a ‘receiver’ in a political society.
- ❖ The rights to relevant information, to use the means of communication for interaction in small scale settings.
- ❖ Media institutions are in control of their audiences.
- ❖ Favors multiplicity, smallness of scale, locality deinstitutionalization, interchange of sender-receiver roles, interaction (Wamoyi, 2017).

THEORIES OF THE PRESS OPERATING IN AFRICA MEDIA SYSTEMS

According to Ocitti (1999) he stated, the fact that African countries have lately shown signs of embracing the values of democracy makes it all the more imperative for a theoretical understanding of how this change

is affecting relationships between individuals, the media, institutions and the state within Africa itself. The changing political dynamics brings out even more critically the need to understand the interplay between the media, as the mirror of social and political freedoms, and politics as the ultimate struggle for power in African societies, or in any society for that matter.

The four theories of the press developed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schram in 1956, provide, so far, the best philosophical and analytical bases for understanding this complex role of the media in society. Although they refer explicitly to the 'press' in their work, it is important to point out from the outset, as they themselves do, that, what they really mean was the media in general. **The first of these theories is the authoritarian theory**, which evolved out of the political authoritarianism and social relations that prevailed in the sixteenth century in Europe. Other societies have no doubt also manipulated the public through such authoritarian use of the media to reflect the views of the ruling elite. As we begin the new millennium, however, it is Africa that still needs to overcome this authoritarian perception of the truth and grant the media freedom. It is this absolutist approach to the media that forms what has essentially been the core of the recurring struggles between African journalists and political leaders. The constant problems of dictatorship, military rule, one-party systems and lack of democratic consolidation that has formed much of the history of Africa during the past thirty years or so, manifestly attests to this mentality. It is important to see how far African leaders are now willing to give journalists freedom of the press in light of the democratization process under way (Ocitti, 1999).

The second theory of the press is the libertarian model, a by-product of the philosophy of liberalism that evolved between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was the period of the Enlightenment in Europe, when individuals began to demand greater political freedom from the authoritarian monarchs.

The significance of this theory to Africa stems from the fact that it helps us better understand the degree to which governments are, or are not, interfering with the work of the media during the ongoing democratization process. It also helps us explain what has already been alluded to; namely, that the relationship between the media and governments in a liberal democracy should point towards the open marketplace of ideas. But to what degree has this actually been occurring in Africa since the latest efforts to establish and/or consolidate democracy began?

The third press theory is the social responsibility model, which is in large measure an outgrowth of the libertarian theory, or, what Siebert et al (1956) refer to as “a grafting of new ideas onto traditional theory.” In principle the theory accepts most of the functions of the press or media as advocated by the libertarian model, but questions the social roles of the media under liberal principles. This skeptical approach finds its genesis in the technological advancements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during which the size,

speed and availability of information changed, while the new technology also gave rise to the birth and expansion of various new media, including radio, cinema and television (Ocitti, 1999).

Furthermore, with growing urbanization, rising levels of literacy and the growth of the middle class, ownership of the media began to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. This not only gave media owners a tremendous source of power, but made it increasingly difficult for newcomers to break into the new media. It soon emerged that the media owners virtually determined what sorts of facts, i.e., “truth” were to appear in the media. This was a far cry from the old concept of the press as a free marketplace of ideas and opinions that the libertarian model championed, and issues such as libel, slander, and privacy soon came to take a prominent place in public discourse over the role of the media. Consequently, the concept of public interest began to take center stage (Ocitti, 1999). In Africa, where democracy is in its embryonic stage, a socially responsible media that knows that public information is necessary not only for citizens to make rational decisions but that it is needed also to spur economic and social development, is an urgent need.

The fourth theory of the press is the Soviet communist theory, a product of twentieth century Marxist ideology that maintained the supremacy of the party over the Soviet population. According to this theory, the press functions at the service of the party and state. Individuals are expected to be loyal to the party and state, and not to criticize party policies whatsoever. The mass media in the Soviet Union and its satellite states reflected this ideology in its most original form, not only instrumentally to disseminate government propaganda, but as part and parcel of the party and state machinery. As Siebert et al explain, “in the Soviet system, there [was] not a theory of the state, and a theory of communication; there [was] only one theory”. And, in a remarkable similarity with its older authoritarian version, the crucial point of this theory was the creation of unity in society as the key function of the press (Ocitti, 1999).

The demise of the Soviet system and the end of the Cold War has rendered this theory largely irrelevant in discussing contemporary policy issues regarding the media in Africa. Although a number of African countries, including Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Sao Tome and Principe, and Guinea Bissau did flirt with Marxist governments at various stages of their history, the global political and economic realities of the late 1980s, as well as mounting domestic pressures for political reforms, forced them to abandon their belief in Marxism and embrace instead the concept of liberal democracy, and with it more open media policies (Ocitti, 1999).

The four theories outlined above form the basis upon which the media have generally been analyzed in the past and will probably be scrutinized in future. Whether one looks at them as generic concepts or as

applicable only selectively, the philosophical and historical foundations of these theories form in large measure, the basis upon which other media theories have evolved (Ocitti, 1999).

Media roles now recognize the different levels of political and social developments in different parts of the world, and also the effects of the new media, such as videos, satellites, the internet and other new information technologies. These new technologies may well redefine the parameters of the libertarian and social responsibility press theories in the future. In fact, this assumption is implicit in McQuail's (1994), Development Media Theory and the Democratic-Participant Media Theory.

According to McQuail (1994), **development media theory** takes as its starting point the fact that countries that are in the transitional stage from authoritarianism to economic and political reforms could not be expected to have the necessary conditions or infrastructures to sustain media freedom comparable to those that exist in the developed countries. In this situation, the functions and goals of the press must be seen differently, especially around the following themes: the primacy of national development tasks (economic, social, cultural, and political), the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy, support for democracy, and solidarity with other developing countries (Ocitti, 1999).

In other words, in emerging societies, the responsibilities of the media must be emphasized much more than their rights and freedoms. In a sense, this theory accepts the notion that, in developing countries, nation-building must precede media freedom. In the immediate aftermath of Africa's independence in the 1960s, it was a theme that was quite popular among African politicians and academics alike. It fitted with what African politicians then preached that there was a need to unite and build the new nations first before democracy could gain ground. The expectation was that the media would be part of this process in an instrumental way that both de-emphasized critical appraisal of the leaders' performances and advocated national unity (Ocitti, 1999).

As far as **democratic-participant theory** is concerned, it starts from the assumption that the mainstream media, largely dominated by private interests or public monopolies, do not accommodate the interests and views of minorities or small groups. As McQuail (1994) explains, "the theory supports the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community, interest group or subculture... The theory rejects the market as a suitable institutional form, as well as all 'top-down' professional provision and control. Participation and interaction are key concepts. In Africa, this theory finds its practical expression in community radio stations and rural newspapers, and may include the call for developing the oral tradition as a means of mass communication on the continent (Ocitti, 1999).

Summary



The Soviet-Communist Theory originated from the Soviet Union from Marxist, Leninist, and Stalinist thoughts after the 17th century. Under the Soviet-Communist Theory, the state owns or in some way controls all forms of mass media directly. The media's authority falls in the hands of a small group of party leaders. The role of the media in countries applying the Soviet-Communist Theory is to act as an instrument of the ruling party to unite people of the state, and to carry out plans of the party and state, bringing about societal change. The Authoritarian Theory describes the situation where states view the mass media as an instrument at all times. The role of the media is to mainly educate citizens, and acts as a propaganda tool for the ruling party.

The main difference between the Authoritarian theory and the Soviet-Communist Theory is that while the former allows both private and public media ownership, the latter allows strictly only public media ownership. Another difference is that while the Authoritarian medias are mainly use to maintain societal status quo, a Soviet-Communist media is often used to bring about societal changes. The Libertarian Theory originally came from liberal thought in Europe from the 16th Century. The Libertarian Theory describes societies that provide media with unrestrained freedom, especially from government control, so that they are free to report a variety of views. There is no control or censorship. Under a libertarian media system, ownership of media is mainly private.

Under the Libertarian Theory, the media's purpose is to inform, entertain, sell, and serve as a "watchdog", keeping the government in check. Libertarian Theory involves some innate distrust of the role of the government and the state and a belief that everybody has rights to information.

Social Responsibility theory is an outgrowth of the Libertarian Theory. However, the Social-Responsibility Theory does not assume that anyone can use the media to publish anything like the Libertarian Theory. Instead, this theory requires the media to adhere to professional standards and codes of conduct when exercising their editorial freedom. Under the Social-Responsibility Theory, ownership of media is mostly private and practice self-regulation according to standards, codes and guiding principles. The media is relatively free of arbitrary government controls.

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