**Press Theories**

The Press Theories also known as Normative Theories of Communication are a group of four theories proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm together in their book called “Four Theories of the Press”.

Theories of the Press are proposed by

1. Frederick S. Siebert
2. Theodore Peterson
3. Wilbur Schramm’s

It constituted the most well-known attempt to clarify the link between mass media culture in modern world. Their theories have been widely accepted and utilized by media scholars. However, their theories appear in some respects outdated and too simplistic to be useful in today’s global mass media environment.

These theories were made to clean media practices and guide the press. Accuracy and objectivity was taken to be the major improvement factors. These theories tell media how they should behave even though their philosophies are different.

The theories do not give any kind of scientific predictions or explains them scientifically. They just provide explanation on the relationship of press in different parts of the world with their governments, ownership of press and how that kind of press affects audiences. The theory also talks about control and censorship of press.

The four theories are:

1. Authoritarian theory

In this theory, the function of the press is to support the policies and actions of the state, and its authorities. The press should foster social solidarity and national unity. The state has the right to control the press for the overall public good. In many cases, controlling the press means preventing the press from embarrassing the existing government, to repress criticism and protest, and to severely restrict press freedom. The authoritarian view was prevalent in 17th century Europe where publishing came under the prerogative and censorship powers of the monarch and church. The authoritarian theory is embraced today by many leaders of non-democratic states;

[Authoritarian theory](https://www.businesstopia.net/mass-communication/authoritarian-theory-mass-communication)of press is the control of media with government, elites or authorities. Media is not allowed to criticize the powerful people or the government. There is censorship by government on criticisms and other things negatively portrayed about them.

Similarly, licensing of media, punishments and content approval are other means used to curb full freedom of press. Media is taken as a means to serve the interest of authorities and state. The reason given as to why it is done is “to achieve social order”.

The theory ignores needs of people and only establishes agendas and propaganda. There is limited freedom. The press in Bhutan can be taken as an example of authoritarian theory in practice.

Communist Theory

[Communist theory](https://www.businesstopia.net/mass-communication/communist-theory-mass-communication) is also known as the Soviet Theory as it came from the then Soviet Union after Russian Revolution of 1917. The main role of media in communist theory is to promote communism and achieve communist goals. The main representatives of communist power control the media. Information is controlled and is used to develop people’s skills and fulfill their basic needs.

The target population is the working class people. It is more liberal than authoritarian theory on information content in press. Media is self regulatory and there is no censorship. An example of this theory is how press functions in China.

1. Libertarian theory

The function of the press is to protect the people’s liberties and rights, and to inform the public so they can participate as citizens in democratic self-government. The liberal theory prefers a privately owned news media that is maximally free to inform citizens and criticize public policy, as well as act as a watchdog on authorities. The right to publish and express oneself freely is not a prerogative of the state or a government. It is a fundamental right of free individuals. The liberal theory argues that a free marketplace of ideas, while it may cause harm over the short term, is the best safeguard in the long run for a free and liberal society.

[Libertarian theory](https://www.businesstopia.net/mass-communication/libertarian-theory-mass-communication) came in opposition to authoritarian theory. Press was given more freedom and people involved were taken to be conscience and intellectual. They were believed to possess the capability to find out truth from false. Public engagement was also started. People were given a lot of press freedom and there was little to no government control over press. “Laissez-faire” approach was used.

There were some restrictions in place for libel, false advertising and false news, but for the most part, media was different body rather than a part of the government. Media could criticize government and serve as gatekeepers or watchdogs for the society. It ignored privacy and worked for capitalism. An example of it was U.S. adopting it after the declaration of independence.

1. Social responsibility theory

An American initiative in the late forties brought forth the social responsibility theory. Realizing that the market had failed to fulfil the promise that press freedom would reveal the truth, 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 wrote 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” As opposed to the libertarian theory, the social responsibility principle is to provide an entrance to different mass media to minority groups. The journalist is accountable to his audience as well as to the government. It attempts to balance the liberal stress on the freedom of the press. It argues that such freedoms of a powerful news media must be balanced by social responsibilities. Journalists have a duty to provide well-contextualized news in a comprehensive manner. They have a duty to provide a diverse forum of views and values. They have a duty to go beyond entertaining news consumers and to provide a core of in-depth analysis on the most serious issues. Most media systems in Western Europe today come close to the social responsibility theory.

Social Responsibility Theory

In [social responsibility theory](https://www.businesstopia.net/communication/social-responsibility-theory), press is given freedom to publish anything but has to be responsible in its actions. The main role of press is to help preserve and growth of democracy. Guidelines and regulations make the press behave in a responsible manner. Government can censor if it deems some information to be inappropriate for democracy and social order.

Audience is also taken to be responsible in their understanding of things shown in media. Government can not intrude media as per its will. Media is taken to be a spokesperson of the poor and marginalized as well as provides diverse views/perspectives.

It ignores corporations using press for commercialization and profit. It is found in most European countries and other countries under European influence around the world nowadays.

1. **Soviet communist theory**

It is closely tied to a specific ideology; the communist. Media in communist societies are state-owned and the government had a division of censorship. Other means of control included the appointment of editors, a large number of directives regarding press content and press reviews and criticisms. The media organizations in this system were not intended to be privately owned and were to serve the interests of the working class. Today, the name of this theory is only of historical interest. The clearest current example of the communist theory is how the media function in China, where TV, radio, and newspapers are controlled by the communist government. However, the press in China has come a long way since the Chinese Communist Party took over the Chinese government in 1949 and it continues to expand its freedom heading into the 21st century. Even though the communist press theory was based on the model of the Soviet press system it does not fully describe the Chinese press system today after more than 20 years of economic liberalizations and opening to the outside world. For instance, the Soviet press model removes the profit motive from publishing and broadcasting. But China’s economic reforms started in 1978 changed all that. Economic reform of the media in China began almost as early as the overall economic reform (Zhao,1998, p.53). In addition, media commercialization has become an important part of the development of the market economy as the Chinese government has adopted a policy of gradually cutting subsidies and encouraging commercialized financing. More importantly, advertising, the capitalist genie, has finally made its way to the world of communist media. To meet the new challenge, the press, including the ones directly under the control of the party, not only has to publicize the party’s policies, but also keep an eye on the bottom line as the press has been assuming increasing responsibilities in covering the cost and balancing the sheet. Even the official Xinhua news agency and the party paper, People’s Daily, are trying to turn out more profitable publications. Editors in China are made aware that newspapers are not only political tools, but they have to be money-makers as well. To be competitive on the market, newspapers in China have to appeal to the readers, not just the party officials. The biggest challenge facing Chinese editors today is to strike the right balance between being politically correct and commercially viable. Also the Soviet model mostly prescribes a positive role for the press – the press should be an agitator, an organizer and promoter for the socialist cause. In the Chinese press today, readers can find more negative news, which is a taboo in the rigid communist media model as bad news are seen as demoralizers.

Given the rampant corruption among government officials in China, some high-level government officials encourage the press to engage in more investigations (People’s Daily, 2002). For example, Caijing,a financial magazine, made a name for itself for its investigative reporting of the financial sector (Kurtenbach, 2002). And some provincial governments have made new laws banning their officials from refusing interviews with the press (China Daily, 2001). Such laws were unimaginable before the reforms or under the Soviet media model.

Under the communist media system, all media are owned by the state and no foreign media are allowed. But even thought the majority of the media in China today are still owned by the state, there are some joint ventures already with foreign investment, including a joint-venture Internet service in technology information between the People’s Dailyand the News Corp owned by Australian media tycoon, Rupert Murdoch (Reuters, 1998). Now as a member of the World Trade Organization, China will face more and more foreign capital in its media industries whether it likes it or not. However, one of the major problems concerning the Chinese press today is the low ethical standard held by some local papers. It is no longer rare news that newspapers are sued for their inaccurate and sensational stories, which seldom occurs under an orthodox communist media system. The Soviet communist media theory would be an inaccurate summary of the lively and messy, and yet controlled press in China today.

In the wake of the theories old and new one important question remains: How should the ethics of journalism change to face the challenges of a new media environment whether in China, the United States or any other country? To make matters more complicated, the news media are now global in a radically pluralistic world.

In conclusion, while the four theories of the press have the beauty and elegance of a very simple but clear structure, they have difficulties in providing a reliable guide in today’s global press systems because the universality of the theories is limited. However, if we try too hard at being specific and accurate in describing press systems, we may end up with as many press theories as the number of press systems that exist. Another important factor in building a more reliable theoretical guide may be that more dynamics need to be built into the theories so that they can accommodate the changes in the press systems around the world.