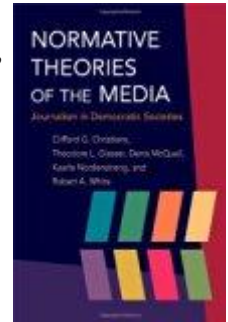


Clifford G. Christians, Theodore L. Glasser, Dennis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Robert A. White. *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. History of Communication Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xi + 275 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07618-3.



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Normative Theories and the Rise of the Fifth Estate

In *Normative Theories of the Media*, authors Clifford G. Christians, Theodore L. Glasser, Denis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Robert A. White seek to understand the roles the media have assumed in democracies since the end of the Cold War. The authors are especially attentive to the changing mediums and formats of journalism, and their outlook for the future of the Fourth Estate is a pessimistic one. They note, in particular, that the fall of the former Soviet Union and the increasing availability of the Internet were accompanied by “a political-ideological shift away from social responsibility in media governance and toward deregulation and entrepreneurial growth” (p. 15). While the Internet should theoretically have facilitated the freer flow of information, the authors argue that, today, economic and political constraints discourage journalists from reporting controversial political issues (p. 240). Finally, *Normative Theories of the Media* disentangles the perception that democracies naturally engender

media independence. As a historian of democratization, I will focus on the ways in which the work applies to the theoretical literature on democracy and the press.

The authors wrote the book to overhaul the foundational 1956 work *Four Theories of the Press*, which sought to theorize the role mass media assumed in the world, focusing especially on Western Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union in the wake of World War II. *Four Theories* authors Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm contended that the press assumed the task of “social responsibility” in democratic societies, and they suggested that the measure of the media’s “freedom” corresponded with the political system in which it was embedded. *Four Theories* proposed four typologies of press systems: authoritarian, libertarian, socially responsible, and Soviet Communist. The essential shortcoming of *Four Theories*, the authors of the book under review write, was its assumption that

freedom of the press naturally arose in the absence of state suppression. That is, *Four Theories* “collapsed into one level of consideration at least three levels of analysis: philosophical approaches, political systems, and press systems” (p. 16). Thus *Normative Theories* disaggregates these levels to demonstrate the interconnection and distinctness of each. In so doing, the authors reveal that freedom of the press depends on the social, political, and economic pressures within which the media operates, as well as traditions of the media itself. They further draw on the theoretical work of such scholars as Raymond Williams and Noam Chomsky to question the relevance of Western models of freedom of the press for the developing world (p. 14).

In part 1, the authors explore the “philosophical” underpinnings of media roles by tracing debates about civil society, ethics, and democracy to the classical era. The authors argue that the normative traditions of media that developed from antiquity—corporatist (500 BC–1500 AD), libertarian (1500–1800), social responsibility (1800–1970), and citizen participation (1970–present)—evolved in the context of distinct philosophical worldviews. These worldviews alternatively privileged organic unity of society, individualism, or ethical commitments of social responsibility, with a normative media tradition corresponding to each. This section, while informative, focuses on the abstract principles that the authors claim to move beyond. Given that their focus is on the roles the media *has* assumed, rather than theories about the role it *should* assume, this section offers little that is new and might have been reduced to allow for more case studies.

In part 2, the authors explore various democratic polities to explicate the different forms the media assumes in each. They reveal distinct models of democracy, which they term administrative, pluralist, civic, and direct, which stem from two principal democratic traditions: civic republicanism and procedural liberalism. These democratic

traditions, identified by Jürgen Habermas, prescribe a distinct view of the role citizens play in policing state actions. Civic republicanism, which emerged from the French Revolution, privileges equality and community and looks to the state to protect these ideals (p. 93). Procedural liberalism, espoused by John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, privileges the autonomous individual. This discussion of democratic traditions is meant to provide the foundation for understanding how media systems correspond; however, it offers a shallow understanding of what “democracy” entails, failing to discuss the legal, juridical, or institutional mechanisms necessary for a polity to be considered a democracy.

The core of the authors’ intervention is found in part 3, where they examine the four roles—monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative—they ascribe to media in democracies. They write that the “mutual conflict between some of the underlying democratic values, for instance between editorial autonomy and giving access,” “structural inequality between the political elite and ordinary citizens,” the conflict between political and economic goals, and economic and institutional constraints on the media, are the primary obstacles to allowing media participation in public life and the provision of media forums for civic engagement (p. 124).

The authors intend their examination to demonstrate that the strict demarcation between “free” and “unfree” media is an illusion. While one would assume that the arrival of the Internet would have supported civic engagement in democratic society through the means of media, new journalistic norms have not arisen (p. 235). Thus, they argue that we should pay attention to extra-media activities of research, monitoring, reflection, and means of accountability that exist in contemporary civil society—the so-called Fifth Estate—to understand how technology has reformed traditional notions of civic engagement (p. 241).

This gesture towards the rising significance of the Fifth Estate as a new source of information and forum for civic engagement is the book's greatest contribution. The arguments could have been strengthened by offering more historical

case studies on the recent role media has played in democracies. Nonetheless, this work will serve as an important resource for students of democracy to consider how evolving media roles are presently altering definitions of democracy.

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