

R o n a l d T. F a r r a r

# mass communication

an introduction to the field

second edition





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**Ronald T. Farrar**

*University of South Carolina*

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# dedication

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**For Gayla Dennis Farrar**







# preface

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**This book is for students** who want to know more about the mass communications media—how and why they operate as they do, and how they influence our society.

In a very real sense, we have become a media-driven nation. We cannot overestimate the influence the mass media exert over our politics, economy, and culture. To understand any of these areas, then, we must understand the mass media—and that is the central reason this book was written.

But just as the media drive our society, we define and drive the mass media. The choices we as consumers make determine whether a television series, a newspaper columnist, a magazine, or a radio station format succeeds or fails. The mass media compete for audience time and advertising dollars. Any description and interpretation of the media that did not take this into full account would be naive.

The student who hopes to enter the mass media field as a professional should find the chapters ahead a useful—and, I hope, uplifting—orientation. Many of the chapters specifically discuss career opportunities. But the book is written also for the communications *consumer*, the person who will spend a substantial portion of life watching television, listening to radio, reading magazines and newspapers and books, and absorbing (or tuning out) advertising messages. Tens of thousands of such hours lie ahead for each of you; this book is intended to help you make those hours more productive.

Jim Wright of the Dallas *Morning News*, in a flattering review of the first edition of this book, suggested in his syndicated column that this would be the ideal textbook for a course every American should be required to take called “Surviving Mass Communications,” because, in Wright’s words, “that’s what we are all trying to do”:

This is the Information Age, and most of the information you get about events that occur outside your own neighborhood is brought to you by the various media of mass communications. You need this secondhand information, not only to be an informed citizen and voter, but to get through your daily routine. In our day, what you don’t know can hurt you plenty.

Yet the average U.S. citizen has a staggering lack of knowledge about how modern mass communications work. Few have even a nodding acquaintance with the processes, know anything about the hundreds of agencies competing for our attention and dollars, or understand the conflicting loyalties and pressures working on the people who make their living there.

Even intellectuals who consider themselves thoroughly and completely educated have the most incredible delusions about the media sources of most of their current events information.

Yes, I know you don’t have to understand a carburetor or a differential to drive a modern car. But you do have to know to put gas in. And it is helpful to be able to distinguish between forward and reverse. A modern American who cannot tell the difference between a straight news report and an opinion column is operating at about the level of the motorist who has yet to figure out how the key fits in the keyhole.

Wright may or may not be accurately depicting today's mass media audiences, but we can make the case that the more we know about modern mass media, the better we will be able to cope with life in the twenty-first century. This book will not make you a mass media expert. It should, however, help you understand how the system works for—and upon—all of us.

The overall approach throughout the text is (1) to observe the industry's environment in its historical, technological, legal, economic, ethical, and social contexts and (2) to provide more specific portraits of various subgroups—television, newspapers, radio, magazines, advertising, public relations, films, books, and so on—that comprise the mass communications field. I hope the observations are reliable and the portraits interesting.

Beyond that, this edition also features:

- An increased emphasis on technology. This book will deal less with specific technical innovations—which will rapidly become dated—than on the cumulative effects that new technologies have on media content and ownership, along with the new ethical demands technology places on media professionals.
- An entire chapter devoted to minorities and women in the media. Women and minority group members remain woefully underrepresented in positions of mass media leadership.
- Separate chapters dealing with community journalism and photographic communication, fields far larger than generally acknowledged.
- Strong emphasis throughout on the mass media as business operations which must compete if they are to survive in a free society. It is important for all consumers to gain a realistic understanding of how the media are financed and how advertising dollars are allocated. Advertising creation and placement, market research, audience analysis, and other processes critical to a realistic understanding of the communications industries are discussed in these pages.
- In-depth discussions of media law and ethics, topics that affect all of society and not just journalists. From more than a quarter century of teaching, I know that students can handle this material and welcome exposure to it.
- A separate chapter dealing with mass communications as a global phenomenon, showing the vast gaps between the “have” and the “have not” nations of the world. This chapter examines economic, cultural, and political barriers to the free flow of information throughout the earth; it also discusses privatization and other global trends that were born or accelerated following the breakup of the former Soviet Union.
- A menu-driven format that gives instructors the opportunity to construct their own coursebook from a menu of 22 chapters. Selected chapters may be arranged in any order. Each custom-printed coursebook includes a full table of contents and an index.

A number of persons have helped with this book, far more than I can mention here. I am especially grateful to Donald McKinney, Donald Woolley, Bonnie Drewniani, A. Jerome Jewler, and Robert Jones, all friends and colleagues at the University of South Carolina; Roy L. Moore and the late Theodore Schulte of the University of Kentucky; John Carroll, now editor of the Baltimore *Sun*; Scott Cutlip, dean emeritus of the Grady School of Journalism at the University of Georgia; R. Dean Mills, dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri; and a great many others. Their insights and expertise have been invaluable, and I am in the debt of these friends and associates who read and commented upon various portions of the book. Let me hasten to add that any errors that may have crept in are mine alone.

In addition, I would like to thank those professors who reviewed one or more drafts of the entire manuscript: Paul Anderson, University of Tennessee at Martin; Barbara Hartung, San Diego State University; James Hoyt, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Greg Lisby, Georgia State University; Jeffrey McCall, DePauw University; Maclyn McClary, Humboldt State University; Robert Ogles, Purdue University; Jerry Pinkham, College of Lake County; George Ridge, University of Arizona; and Paul Shaffer, Austin Peay State University.

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A friend and former teaching colleague, Lloyd W. (Bill) Brown, has developed the special Annotated Teaching Edition of this book. Bill's expanded edition for teachers is a fine piece of work; teachers across the country will thank him for it, as I do. Special thanks also go to Jill Van Pelt, Larry Hoffman, and Anthony Henstock, each of whom served as research assistants. Their contributions to the theory, radio, recordings, and film chapters were particularly helpful. Still other people granted permission to use resource documents and to reprint copyrighted material. While these are acknowledged in the text, their cooperation and prompt responses are appreciated. Also, I want to thank the team at Brown & Benchmark that turned this manuscript into a book.

As ever, and most important, I want to thank my students. They have seen and heard the ideas in this book take form over the years, and their questions and comments, in the classroom and in countless informal conversations, have proved invaluable to me. One such former student, my daughter, Janet Farrar Worthington (now an author and editor in her own right) also provided a number of excellent suggestions for visual materials to accompany the text. My son, Bradley Farrar, contributed valuable—and free—advice on the finer points of communications law as I developed that portion of the manuscript. Finally, the entire project has benefited from the encouragement, insight, and perceptive editing of my wife and closest friend, Gayla Dennis Farrar, to whom this volume is dedicated.

Ronald T. Farrar

# CONTENTS

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Chapter A	An Introduction to Mass Communication and the Social Context.....	1
Chapter D	Newspapers.....	15
Chapter G	Magazines .....	35
Chapter H	The Book Industry .....	53
Chapter I	Growth of the Electronic Media .....	73
Chapter J	Radio .....	89
Chapter K	Recordings.....	103
Chapter L	Television.....	119
Chapter M	Films.....	141
Chapter N	Public Relations .....	157
Chapter O	Advertising .....	177
Chapter P	Mass Communication and the Law .....	199
Chapter Q	Ethics and Self-Regulation.....	219
Chapter V	Technology and the Future .....	239
	Credits.....	253
	Index.....	255



# chapter

# A

## **An Introduction to Mass Communication and the Social Context**

### **Objectives**

When you have finished studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- ② Define communication and contrast it with mass communication
- ② Explain and compare four major concepts of mass communications operation and control used throughout the world today
- ② Understand the primary roles the mass communications system plays in our society
- ② Describe some of the current criticisms of mass media performance and ethical values

**During** the early years of the nineteenth century, what we today call the “media of mass communications” consisted primarily of a relatively few newspapers, a smattering of magazines, and a frail book industry. Yet even then, political leaders expressed concerns about the growing popularity of these emerging institutions and the power they wielded. As Thomas Babington Macaulay, the British poet, historian, and statesman, observed nervously in 1828, “The gallery in which the reporters sit has become a **fourth estate** of the realm”—right up there, in his judgment, with the leaders of the church, the nobility, and the House of Commons.<sup>1</sup> More than a century and a half later, our reliance upon the mass media has become almost total. Without them, governments would likely be paralyzed and laws unevenly and unfairly administered; education would be drastically curtailed; there would be no advertising and, as a result, less commerce; and we would enjoy much less varied entertainments. We live in a synthetic society, as Wilbur Schramm has reminded us, and the media of mass communications create that synthesis.<sup>2</sup>

The dimensions of the system are staggering. When Viacom sought to buy out Paramount in 1994 in one of the great corporate takeover battles in business history, the resulting conglomerate made one company:

- The biggest owner and operator of cable channels, including MTV, VH-1, Nickelodeon, and Showtime
- The world’s largest producer of broadcast TV shows, accounting for forty hours of programming a week and including several hit programs
- The biggest book producer, publishing 26 of the top-selling 152 hardcover books sold in 1993
- The owner of the biggest video rental company (Blockbuster), taking in more annual revenue than the next 500 competitors combined
- The biggest retailer of interactive home video games
- One of the largest cable system owners, serving one in every fifty-two cable TV subscribers
- The owner of a television syndication library that includes “I Love Lucy,” “The Twilight Zone,” “The Cosby Show,” and “Star Trek: The Next Generation”
- The owner of nearly 5 percent of the country’s 25,200 movie screens<sup>3</sup>



While millions watched intently, television showed us the drama, as it began unfolding early in 1995, surrounding the trial of celebrity O. J. Simpson on murder charges. It was a media circus, but audiences seemingly could not get enough.

# The Information Highway

Everybody knows what the telephone is for. It rings. You pick it up. A voice travels down a wire and gets routed and switched right to your ear.

Everybody knows what to do with the television. You turn it on, choose a channel and let advertising, news and entertainment flow into your home.

Now imagine a medium that combines the capabilities of phones with the video and information offerings of the most advanced cable systems and data banks. Instead of settling for what happens to be on at a particular time, you could select any item

from an encyclopedia menu of offerings and have it routed directly to your television set or computer screen. A movie? Airline listings? Tomorrow's newspaper or yesterday's episode of *Northern Exposure*? How about a new magazine or a book? A stroll through the L. L. Bean catalog? A teleconference with your boss? A video phone call with your lover? Just punch up what you want, and it appears just when you want it.

Welcome to the information highway. It's not here yet, but it's arriving sooner than you might think.

Philip Elmer-DeWitt in *Time*, 12 April 1993.

The deal, involving around \$10 billion in cash and stock, vividly underscores the many roles mass communications systems play in our lives—and the value colossal business interests now place upon such systems.

## Communication and Mass Communication

Communication is the exchange of information—two minds seeking to share the same thought. This is not an easy task. Each of us experiences personal communication breakdowns: conversations in which directions and explanations are misconstrued, stories or jokes that somehow misfire. In **mass communication**, the task is even more difficult. The scale is bigger and less personal, the information flows mostly one way, and the possibilities for error are legion. We can define this ongoing, complex procedure in this way: *Mass communication is a process by which an individual or organization transmits messages to a large, diverse audience with limited opportunity to respond.* The media (means) of mass communications include (but obviously are not confined to) magazines, newspapers, radio and television, books, recordings, and films.

Our society enjoys all these media in abundance. For example:

- The 1994 combined circulation of all magazines in the United States exceeded 360 million—more than one magazine for every woman, man, and child. More than 90 percent of all adult Americans read magazines regularly, and the typical reader buys at least thirty-six issues per year.
- Daily newspaper circulation exceeds 60 million. More than 8,000 weeklies are published in the United States, adding millions more readers to this total. Only 14 percent of all adult Americans say they rarely or never read a newspaper.
- Television sets operate in 99 percent of all American households; 98 percent of households have at least one color set. The average household receives 30.5 channels, including cable channels. Television viewing averages nearly seven hours per household per day.
- One American in five, including teenagers as well as adults, bought a book in the past week.
- Ninety-six percent of all teenagers and adults report that they regularly listen to the radio.<sup>4</sup>

The mass communications field also encompasses advertising agencies; wire services; public relations and publicity firms; syndication houses that provide feature and photo material for print media or programs and movies for television; artists and graphic design consultants; research firms for product, audience, and message analysis; independent producers of movies and television programs; and program suppliers. The industry is large and pervasive.

# Mass Media and the Interconnected World

Mass communication can divide us or bring us together. New technologies enable us to send and receive many more messages than before. If we do not like our leaders, we can let them know, talk back. Around the world, communication is becoming two-way, to the concern of autocratic leaders. In the United States, a single man from Texas, Ross Perot, in 1992 proved he could use communication technologies to bypass and challenge old political

structures to reach large audiences. Audiences, through 800 or 900 telephone numbers, can talk back. Individuals and groups can communicate in many other ways as well. Mass communication is becoming more like person-to-person communication—exciting, involving, strange, unpredictable, challenging. International communication has entered a new era. Indeed, we all have.

Donald L. Shaw in *Journalism Quarterly*, Autumn 1992.

We will examine these and other specific media in some detail later. First, we must consider the mass communications system as a whole, learning what it does for us and why society exerts some degree of control over it.

## The Social Roles of Mass Communications

In a pioneering study written in 1948, Harold Lasswell of Yale University identified three important social roles communications play: (1) surveillance of the environment, (2) correlation of the components of society in making a response to the environment, and (3) transmission of social inheritance.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the mass media act as:

- **Sentinel.** We rely on mass communications media to keep us alert to an impending snowstorm, a school board election, the movie schedule at the mall theaters, a department store sale.
- **Arena.** The communications media place events and controversies on the community agenda, focusing attention on issues so that consensus can be reached.
- **Instructor.** Through communications media, we learn what others are saying, wearing, doing. MTV has had an enculturating influence on many young people; Hollywood movies had a similar impact on their parents and grandparents. The media educate us, and, to a very great degree, help us function within our environments.
- **Social and political regulator.** This may be the most important role the mass communications media play. By providing their audiences with realistic information about society and politics, the media help keep leaders honest, social and governmental policies equitable. As eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham put it:

Without publicity on the entire government process, no good is permanent; under the auspices of publicity, no evil can continue. Publicity, therefore, is the best means of securing public confidence.<sup>6</sup>

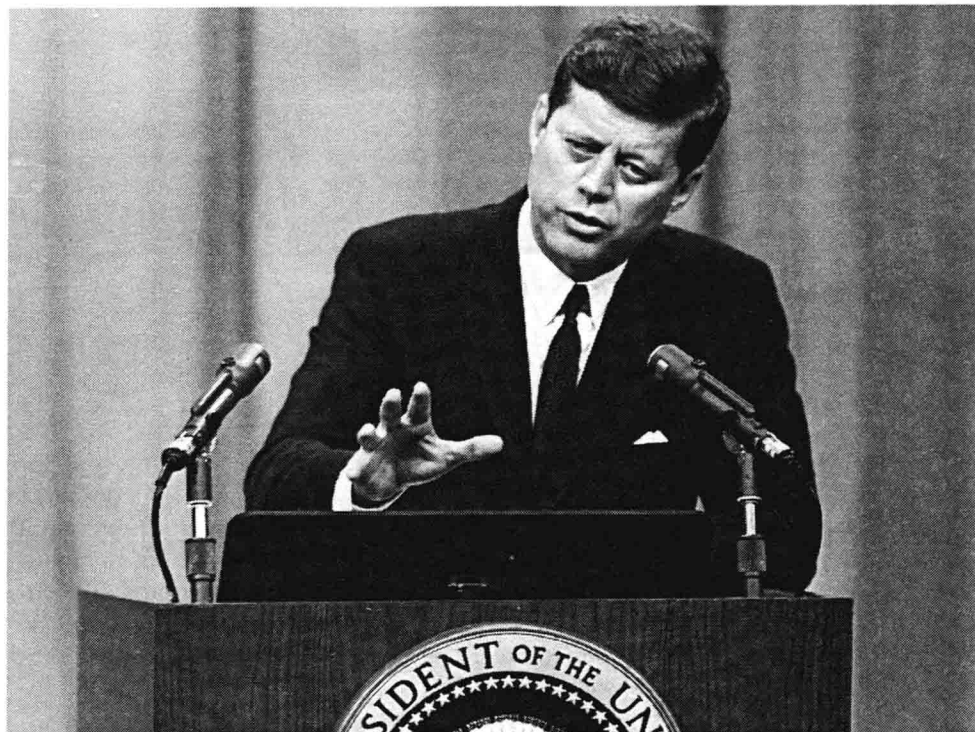
Communications control is also a hallmark of national power and leadership. As Walter Lippmann wrote in 1922:

Nothing affects more the balance of power between Congress and the President than whether the one or the other is the principal source of news and explanation and opinion.<sup>7</sup>

The successes and failures of every U.S. president since the television age began—Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton—have been at least partly connected to the skill with which they were able to articulate policies and “spin” them effectively to the voters via the mass media. In fact,



Presidents and other public figures utilize the mass media to help set the public agenda. Fewer White House occupants were more effective in communicating via television than John F. Kennedy.



Ronald Reagan, president of the United States for most of the 1980s, bore the nickname The Great Communicator. Johnson, whose term ended in frustration with much he had hoped to accomplish undone, admitted that his greatest single failure as president was his inability to use television effectively. Many thoughtful observers worry that the American public now places so high a priority on media skills that we will no longer elect to governorships or the presidency individuals who, whatever other qualifications they might possess, are not reasonably photogenic and adroit at handling news conferences and television interviews. This reveals the impact communications media have had on our national values.

These concerns, though real, are not new; political leaders have confronted them, in different contexts and with varying degrees of success, for centuries. Early politicians didn't have to cope with television or radio, but every U.S. president since George Washington has found that newspaper journalists can be troublesome. Government leaders and mass communications professionals rarely coexist in perfect harmony. The media do not operate in a vacuum; they are part of the social, economic, and political structure, and they must define their role (or have it defined for them) within the countries where they do business. Every nation places limits of some sort on the freedom its mass media enjoy. In the paragraphs that follow, we will look briefly at the major philosophical theories that have evolved to describe what communications should be and do in the societies they serve.

## Four Concepts of Mass Communication

In a thoughtful and widely quoted series of essays developed for the National Council of Churches, Fred S. Siebert, Wilbur Schramm, and Theodore Peterson examined the social systems the media of mass communications have functioned in, historically and philosophically. They found four distinct patterns of control: authoritarianism, libertarianism, the Soviet theory, and the social responsibility theory.<sup>8</sup>



## Adolf Hitler on the Press

The organization of our [Nazi] press has truly been a success. Our law concerning the press is such that divergencies of opinion between members of the government are no longer an occasion for

public exhibitions, which are not the newspapers' business. We've eliminated that conception of political freedom which holds that everybody has the right to say whatever comes into his head.

Adolf Hitler, *Reichstag* (parliament) speech, 1937.

## Authoritarianism

In authoritarianism, the oldest and most common relationship between the communications media and society and government, the people are under the control of strong leaders. Individual men and women are regarded as ignorant and weak until they organize themselves into a state. Then, given a sense of direction and unity of purpose by their leader—king or queen, czar, emperor, or military dictator—the society can move forward. Benefits accrue to a united society, and eventually these benefits trickle down to individual members. The people obey their leaders, who in turn provide protection as well as guidance.

Authoritarianism is not necessarily evil. Many parents are somewhat authoritarian, at least to some extent; “Eat your vegetables,” they might say, “Don’t stay out too late,” or “Don’t drive too fast.” If their offspring resist, such parents might respond, “Look, I know what’s best for you. You’ll need to do as I say, because you don’t know what’s best for yourself.” Similarly, an old-time football coach’s pregame pep talk might go something like this: “I don’t want any hot dogs out there. No grandstanders looking for personal glory. We must block and tackle *as a team*. Team! Team! Pull together as a team today and we’ll win!” Entire nations operate much like this.

The mass media in a society operating under **authoritarian theory** must contribute to the objectives of the state, or at least not hinder them. This means, for example, that the press may not print both sides of a story; *in an authoritarian society, there is but one side, and one side only*. Anything that suggests otherwise will undermine the progress of the state. Plato, among others, argued against free speech. He warned that unrestrained discussion encourages arguments, which in turn lead to factions; factions then threaten to divide the country, leaving it weak and vulnerable.

Authoritarian leaders expect to control the mass communications media, keeping them in line and silencing individuals who make waves. James Boswell, quoting Dr. Samuel Johnson on the subject, rationalized suppressing open discussion this way:

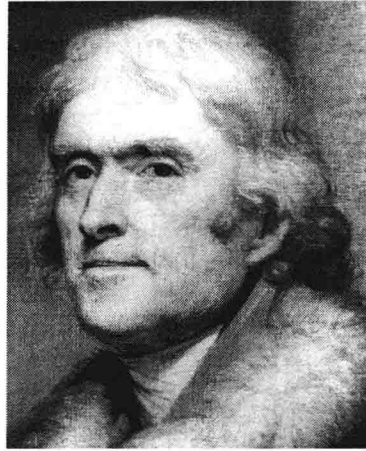
Every society has a right to preserve public peace and order, and therefore has a good right to prohibit the propagation of opinions which have a dangerous tendency. To say the magistrate has this right is using an inadequate word; it is the society for which the magistrate is agent. He may be morally or theologically wrong in restraining the propagation of opinions which he thinks dangerous, but he is politically right.<sup>9</sup>

To our ears, this may seem a chilling notion, but dictators throughout history have endorsed the authoritarian position.

## Libertarianism

Libertarianism represents another, diametrically opposed viewpoint about the nature of humanity. A product of the Age of Reason, **libertarian theory** places a much higher value on the individual. Men and women are inherently rational, say libertarians, and they can operate and develop without the state’s heavy-handed direction.

Often maligned by the newspapers himself, Thomas Jefferson battled for press liberty even when he was adversely affected by it. The U.S. tradition of freedom of expression is traced more directly to Jefferson, perhaps, than to any other public person.



If they are given the facts, individuals will usually respond properly and responsibly to them. In *Aeropagitica*, a rousing defense of free printing written more than three hundred years ago, English poet John Milton proclaimed:

And though all of the windes of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously be licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter?<sup>10</sup>

During the Renaissance, philosophers turned their intellectual energies away from theological questions to study what happens on earth. Dramatic breakthroughs in publishing technology aided the search for truth through reason. Printing on a mass scale, enabled by Johann Gutenberg's development of movable type in the fifteenth century, speeded up the diffusion of ideas throughout the world. With respect for new ideas came respect for the individuals who created and reacted to them.

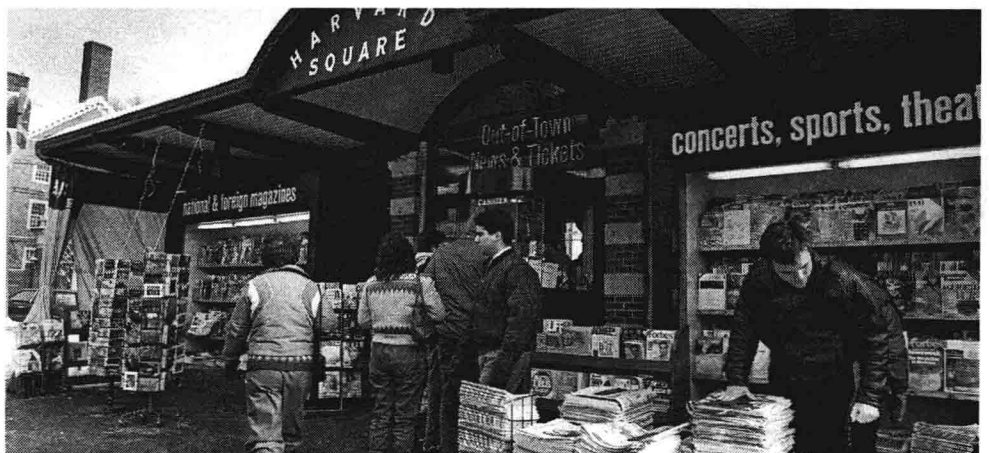
The media of mass communications play a role of the first magnitude in a libertarian society. By conveying a diversity of opinions to the community, the press creates a marketplace of ideas, the forum through which people debate opinions and in which truth will ultimately prevail.

Fortunately for mass communications in America, libertarian philosophy had reached a certain fruition by the time our national government was taking shape. Freedom of expression thus became an integral part of the new Constitution. In a famous and oft-quoted letter to Edward Carrington in 1787, Thomas Jefferson discussed the rationale behind free speech:

The people are the only censors of their governors; and even their efforts will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro' the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.<sup>11</sup>

Libertarianism is the freedom to be wrong as well as right; views that are irresponsible, or even dangerous, can be offered for approval in the intellectual marketplace. The true libertarian is unworried by the clamor, serene in the belief that false

Libertarianism: plenty to choose from in the marketplace of ideas.



ideas will be discredited and truth will sooner or later carry the day. It is a chancy philosophy, as we shall see, but our great system of mass communications was built on it and is permitted to exist because of it.

## The Soviet Theory

As Siebert, Schramm, and Peterson pointed out, there are actually only two basic theories of mass communications, but each has both an older and a newer form. The newer form of authoritarianism is the **Soviet theory**, still operational in much of the world despite the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The Soviet theory differs from other authoritarian frameworks because it replaces mere regulation, which can be passive, with a vigorous activism. In authoritarianism, the government *controls* the media; under the Soviet theory, the government *is* the media.

As he attempted to establish Marxist philosophy in Russia in the years before and after the 1917 Communist Revolution, Lenin shrewdly employed the media of mass communications as a weapon, capable of imparting motivation—if not fear—and instruction to the people. Owned and operated by the government, the news media in a Soviet-style system are deeply involved in keeping the government functional. Under the Soviet theory, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television comprise a social force that defines goals, spurs workers to action, recognizes positive attainments, and criticizes sloppy performance. The media carry much more than merely the party line. As Schramm explains:

The Soviet leaders believed, of course, that power is resident in people, latent in social institutions, and generated in social action. But it can only be realized when it is joined with the ownership of natural resources and the means of production, and when it is organized and directed. The media must therefore be owned and used by the state.<sup>12</sup>

Lenin's editorial philosophy, which ultimately failed in Russia, has nevertheless been picked up by political leaders elsewhere, especially in China and a number of developing countries. For example, some years ago, the editor of the only daily newspaper in a newly independent African country—a country so undeveloped it did not yet have its own currency but instead utilized the currency of its neighbors—explained to a group of U.S. editors and professors the role his newspaper had to play in attempting to modernize that society. "In our first issue," he said, "I published just one story on the first page. One brief story. The rest of the page was blank. That story read something like this: 'We are no longer a European colony. We are a free nation now. And in a free nation we must have pride. People in free nations do *not* use the streets of the capital city as a public toilet.'" That particular mass communications medium did not concern itself with lofty editorials about international economics, the ozone layer, or nuclear disarmament—at least, not just then. More basic issues were at hand.

Under the Soviet theory, the media of mass communications may do much more than inform and entertain. They may serve as motivators, police, lecturers, and even nation builders.

### Lenin on the Press

Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized? It would not allow opposition by

lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government?

Nikolai Lenin, quoted in *Pravda*, 1921.

## The Social Responsibility Theory

To work properly, libertarian theory requires that certain conditions be met. One is that all persons and all opinions must enjoy full and equal access to the intellectual marketplace. Another is that the audience—the public, the voters—must always seek out a wide range of viewpoints, then react intelligently to conflicting ideas. These assumptions, we learned in the mid-twentieth century, may be seriously flawed. First, as American society grew larger, more diverse, and more complex, it became harder to give voice to all viewpoints. The media of mass communications had grown into big businesses, expensive to own and operate. Media management was restricted, if not by law then by circumstance, to a privileged few. And Freudian research began to cast doubt on the idea that society is consistently rational. The public, in other words, might not react intelligently to what it hears.

Elmer Davis, a respected radio commentator who served as director of the Office of War Information during World War II, warned of the need for more care in communicating with the mass audience:

Objectivity is all right if it is really objective, if it conveys as accurate an impression of the truth as can be obtained. But to let demonstrably false statements stand with no warning of their falsity is not what I would call objectivity.<sup>13</sup>

**Social responsibility theory**, then, represents an attempt to bring libertarianism up to date in modern society. It places an obligation on those who control the powerful communications media to make sure that (1) events are reported fairly and accurately and (2) all viewpoints, not merely media owners' opinions, are heard.

Earlier in this century, vigorously competitive newspapers were commonplace, even in smaller communities. If a Democratic candidate for governor made a campaign speech in the town, the Democratic newspaper would likely exaggerate the size and enthusiasm of the crowd. The Republican newspaper, in turn, could be expected to play down the occasion, underestimate the size of the audience, and characterize the crowd response as lukewarm. The intelligent reader could examine accounts in both papers, then decide that the truth probably fell somewhere in between.

Such comparisons are rare today, for only a tiny handful of U.S. communities can support competing newspapers. Far fewer newspapers are published in America than were a century ago; weaker papers have merged into stronger ones, other media have drained away advertising revenue and audience interest, and better highways have made it possible for larger papers to circulate over greater distances. Those newspapers that did survive, social responsibility theorists contend, have an obligation to the public to avoid abusing the privilege they enjoy. Events are too complex, and the stakes are too high, for media owners to distort the news so as to reflect their own biases. Classic libertarianism, the argument runs, is obsolete; changing events and conditions call for the media to play a different role. Mass communications leaders must take up the slack, discussing both sides of each issue and helping the reader to discern truth.

As may be expected, this theory is controversial. Some media owners regard freedom of the press as a personal right; they serve their audiences best, they feel, by presenting their own viewpoints for the public's acceptance or rejection. "Fairness," they argue, represents an artificial and perhaps even cynical exercise that can tie the media in knots. This position was staked out over two centuries ago by Benjamin Franklin, when a writer who disagreed with Franklin asked for space to present his differing view. "My newspaper," Franklin declared, "is not a stagecoach with seats on it for everyone."<sup>14</sup>

But the clear trend, acknowledged or not, has been toward more openness, fairness, and completeness. Newspapers and magazines often print guest editorials or **op ed** (opposite, or facing, the editorial page) columns and letters criticizing social