

Book Review: Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies

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The light treatment of some sources in this collection does not diminish the value of the examinations that *were* conducted. There is only so much landscape that can be covered in nine essays, and the authors cover much in a highly readable fashion. In fact, my only serious complaint about the book is its title. First, it indicts the financial press's performance as 'Bad News' when the book actually offers a far more nuanced picture of the press's shortcomings. Second, the title declares that the press 'missed' the story when nearly all of the contributors acknowledge much fine work was done. Finally, it brands a crisis that happened in the first decade of the 21st century the 'story of the century'. Let's hope no other crisis tops this one in the next 90 years – but that may be wishful thinking.

Nonetheless, if you hope to fully understand the Great Recession, I recommend overlooking the title and adding this book to your reading list and journalism library. Editor Schiffrin says she set out to 'add to the discussion' (p. x) and she has ably done so.

Clifford G. Christians, Theodore L. Glasser, Denis McQuail,
Kaarle Nordenstreng and Robert A. White
Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 275 pp. ISBN 9780 2520 7618 3

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After outlining their complex, multi-layered framework for normative analysis of the media, the authors of this book – all of them eminent media scholars – make a surprising confession: they do not aspire to present an 'alternative' to Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* (p. 32). Instead, Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White call for a 'new beginning' (p. 16) marked by multiple historical and theoretical entry points; their avowed goal is more archival than archetypal, perhaps an appropriate response to a classic text marred by ethnocentric hubris. Or perhaps not. Where *Four Theories* was simplistic, *Normative Theories* – despite its considerable strengths – can be overly complex, contradictory, and cautious. The two books arrive at much the same place, but the virtue of *Normative Theories* is that it emphasizes the need for continuing dialogue. This review, both appreciative and critical, is meant in that spirit.

Whether a coincidence or not, four is still the magic number: *Normative Theories* offers four 'normative traditions of public communication' (p. 19: corporatist, libertarian, social responsibility, and citizen participation), four models of democracy (administrative, pluralist, civic, and direct), and four roles of media (monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative). In principle, these typologies usefully distinguish three levels of consideration prematurely compressed in *Four Theories*. But this is only the beginning of the 'food for thought' (p. 32) on display: see also two traditions of democratic thought, three media tasks, three contextual dimensions for roles, and four media types, just to name a few. I am tempted to say that it is simply too much to digest, but this is also a book that merits and rewards close re-readings.

Chapter 2 traces the multiple philosophical origins of contemporary communicative ideals by linking the emphasis on particular ideals to broad historical periods: truthfulness in the Greek corporate order, freedom in the early modern libertarian order, social responsibility in the period of 'modern populist democracies from 1800 to 1970', and

citizen participation in the contemporary 'postmodern' period (pp. 37–38). Chapter 3 steps back from the historical particulars and quite usefully develops an abstract definition of normative 'theory' as the complex inter-relation between communicative (philosophical) traditions, democratic models, and journalistic roles: there is much to be learned from the transparency of the process through which the authors carefully construct their typologies. The analytical clarity of this formulation is not adhered to throughout, however, in part because journalism makes its way into the discussion at every level instead of being reserved for roles. As a result, the book becomes at times repetitive.

The latter half of *Normative Theories* develops media roles which 'explore the territory once occupied by the four theories' (p. 32). These are arguably the authors' most important and original contribution. One advance comes from distinguishing between and validating both a monitorial (watchdog, informational) role and a radical role that seeks to get at the 'root' of social problems. Another contribution lies in emphasizing cooperation as well as conflict. As the authors show, media also serve positive normative roles through supporting deliberation of diverse civil society voices (facilitative) and even, in some circumstances such as terrorism or natural disasters, by supporting the government itself (collaborative) – though it should be emphasized, as the authors do not adequately, that democratically oriented government action need not involve 'collaboration'. With or without active media support, the state can also usefully promote monitorial, radical, and facilitative roles.

Through this typology of roles, the authors crucially link normative standards to the wide range of publics (not just journalists) who are affected by and have a legitimate stake in the democratic performance of the media. Despite the authors' modest demurals, the typology is broad enough to also be useful for theorizing across non-western as well as western societies. In addition, by showing that normative expectations are plural rather than singular and that even worthy ideals can conflict, the book could help professional and policy debates move beyond global judgments of good and bad to targeted assessments of specific dimensions (e.g. internet as potentially undermining the monitorial role while bolstering the facilitative role).

This is a book that is at pains not to take a stand, to simply lay out the range of options for wider consideration, and it can certainly be used in this way. At the same time, this seeming open-mindedness conceals, in my reading, an underlying and perhaps ultimately complementary set of preferences for liberalism and identity-politics-inflected deliberative democracy.

Liberalism underlies their normative systems built on a foundation of methodological individualism: 'All normative elements finally depend on persons acting according to their conscience about what kind of public communication represents truth, justice, and respect for human dignity' (p. 69). Among *Four Theories'* chief flaws was that it largely equated freedom with the market and oppression with the state, ignoring the democratic 'middle way' offered by western Europe's post-war mixed public-private systems. Under the guise of a fatalistic realism, *Normative Theories* continues to privilege the market. The authors insist in classic liberal fashion that 'no formal claim can legitimately be made on a free press to carry out any particular task' (p. 121), dismiss a Hutchins commission member's advocacy of 'the right of the people to have an adequate press' as a

‘positive’ interpretation of press freedom at odds with the ‘predominant (then as now) negative sense of freedom from any particular duty and constraint’ (p. 122), and summarily conclude that ‘the time has passed ... when direct intervention to protect or raise press standards, as occurred in Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century, would be possible’ (p. 150). In case there were any doubt about their residual liberalism, in the concluding pages the authors even concede that ‘to a certain extent, the account we have given of journalistic roles is largely in conformity’ with a model of good journalism ‘largely based on the Anglo-Saxon example’ (p. 234).

At the same time, Christians et al. are clearly trying to reach beyond liberalism. This is evident in their account of how normative traditions have evolved and improved over time – each in turn providing ‘fuller’, ‘richer’, and more ‘explicit’ conceptual vocabularies than their predecessors – culminating in the model of dialogic citizen participation (pp. 64, 67). Yet this march of history is not devoid of power relations: the ethos of every age ‘is very much related to the major power holders’ worldview ...’ (p. 63). Does this apply to the contemporary period’s search for mutual understanding? No doubt, and yet, in line with Habermas’s analysis, the authors imply that there is something in this quest that transcends domination. Christians et al. argue in universalist fashion that ‘a key condition for establishing a satisfactory normative formula that harmonizes the moral claims of all social actors is the quality of dialogue between social actors’ (p. 78). This makes eminent good sense, as does their general view that by raising awareness of the value-laden aspects of arguments, normative theories can help ‘media policymakers and professionals to acknowledge their own unstated premises’ and thus serve as ‘instruments of emancipation from the status quo’ (p. ix).

But how is emancipation concretely realized? This is where Christians et al. lose their nerve, whereas Habermas (2007; see also Benson, 2009), in his latest writings acknowledging the need for media policy reform, does not. Practices and policy prescriptions have to be adequate to realize normative ideals. If, as the authors pessimistically conclude, we live in an age when ‘there is little serious challenge to the view that the media are primarily a business and that the freedom of the media is the freedom to trade’ (p. 226), then it strains credulity to suppose that ‘small, transient, nonprofessional collective happenings’ oriented toward understanding ‘one’s own identity’ (p. 236) will be adequate to challenge increasingly concentrated, entrenched economic power. This is normative theory that the current power holders would be happy to claim as their own. In which case, alas, the authors make good on their promise of a new beginning without proposing a real alternative.

Even so, the book’s encyclopedic breadth, ambition, and insight – both empirical and theoretical – ensure its lasting value for future research and debate. *Normative Theories* is an important resource for all those who want to make journalism better.

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