

## Press and Society: An Analysis of Old and New Media

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### Abstract

*In 1956, Fred Siebert wrote a book titled *The Four Theories of the Press* which detailed the philosophy, methodology, and outcomes of four different ways to govern and distribute information to the general public. These theories are as follows: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet-communist. In 2019, Peter Pomeransteve wrote a book titled *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. This book details some of the same themes and concepts in a modern context which includes social media. In reconciling these two works, the analysis alters the perspective of which the “every man” views the press, the media, and the information they gain from both. It is important to know where society – and the individual – can improve.*

Walter Lippman (2011), an American journalist, wrote *Public Opinion*. In his first chapter, he describes an island where the news routinely arrives six weeks late. Before news of war came to this island, the citizens continued trading and bartering among their enemies. Likewise, after the war ended, people were still slaughtered on the battlefield for six weeks until the news of the armistice arrived. Without timely access to information, the people on this island saw the world differently, and because of it, lives were lost.

In the same chapter, Lippman (2011) discusses pseudo-environments and actual environments. A pseudo-environment is an individual's perception – what the individual thinks and feels to be true, and a person's actual environment is where they reside physically. For example, Romeo commits

suicide in his actual environment because he perceives Juliet as dead in his pseudo-environment. Lippman is speaking on behalf of acting on false information instead of acting in response to the truth. In some situations, this causes consequences in the actual environment – which happened with Romeo and with the people on the island.

Noam Chomsky (1995), an American linguist, proposed the media belongs to those who have the money to buy it. America, after all, is capitalist society which values commodification above all else. Chomsky theorized the information presented to the public must go through filters. News organizations are a part of corporations, and thus, they will report news in a way that benefits them. For example, the press will alter the news to please the businesses who buy advertising spots. Similarly, flak

(negative responses) have a large impact on the media. As a result, the media tests their news before releasing a segment.

In short, Chomsky concludes that, because of these filters, the media is not reporting the truth, and instead, it's "watered down" by corruption and greed. And as seen with Lippman's piece, information – presented to us by reporters and newspapers – affects how the individual and their society acts and reacts. Untimely information is harmful and even deadly, and so is false information. Ultimately, this opens the door to the discussion of ethics in journalism. Clearly, information is a possession that affects the actions on smaller and larger scales alike, so it is dangerous when information is misrepresented, falsified, or omitted. Both *The Four Theories of the Press* and *This is Not Propaganda* evaluate the ethical and not-so-ethical distribution of information to the general public (Seibert, 1956; Pomeransteve, 2020).

### Old Media

*The Four Theories of the Press* by John Seibert (1956) recounts the history, philosophy, and downfalls of four of the most popular theories of governing the press, and these four theories are named the authoritarian theory, the libertarian theory, the social responsibility theory, and the soviet communist theories.

The authoritarian philosophy states that the truth is the product of a few wise men who have power (Siebert, 1995). This theory is best described as a completely controlled, authority-owned way of operating news organizations. Under this theory, the sources of truth came only from the government, and the truth was anything that portrayed the government positively or furthered their agenda (Siebert, 1995).

As a response, the libertarian theory formed as a combatant. The libertarian theory lies within the ideas (and amendments) of

freedom of speech and of the press. Under this theory, censoring a disproven fact (an opinion presented as a fact) would be considered censoring the truth. It was up to the individual to filter out the real truth amidst all the information, fact and fiction, being thrown their way (Siebert, 1995).

Criticisms against the libertarian theory led to the social responsibility theory. Under this theory, the press is supposed to inform, entertain, sell, and ultimately stir debate amongst the people (Siebert, 1995). Instead of a free-for-all, the sources of truth were derived from facts, and one arrived at it by looking at the facts and reporting "the truth" about them (Siebert, 1995, p. 88). This means no altering or slanting facts to fit a certain agenda. It became the expectation that reporting be objective (unbiased and supported by evidence), and the press leaves room for "comment and criticism," represent all viewpoints, represent all groups of people, and provide access to current and relevant information.

The soviet communist theory was built on the ideals of Marxism, placing an emphasis on unity and a dialectic of social change (Siebert, 1995). This dialectic of social changes states that a thesis and its antithesis will combine into a synthesis to form a resolution (Siebert, 1995). With this in mind, the soviet communist way of truth is that there is only one. Under this theory, there are no opposing political parties. This soviet communist theory is built on the idea of encouraging change as opposed to maintaining the current circumstances. Lastly, the soviet communist theory of the press gladly wishes to take down "the bourgeoisie" (the wealthy, exploitative upper class) and become a classless society.

### New Media

*This is Not Propaganda* by Peter Pomeransteve (2020) explores the flaws with news reporting on social media and web

platforms. More specifically, this book describes an internet battle between facts and disinformation. Pomeransteve discusses the tactics employed in this information-war, and these tactics are comparable to the reign of the authoritarian theory of the press. Though, the side of control has learned how to adapt. Thus, history may be repeating itself, but history has learned from its failures, too.

Now, the tactics lie within exploiting the extensive freedom on the internet and the flaws of the people who use it. The usage of troll farms, bots, and manpower are among today's most popular attacks against accurate information (Pomeransteve 2020). Even when taking precautions against these attacks, the public is only capable of a limited defense. In the first chapter, Pomeransteve discusses the disinformation campaigns of two different individuals: Babar Aliev and Volodya. In one of these cases, the effectiveness of the disinformation campaign led to violence (Pomeransteve 2020).

In the same chapter, Pomeransteve recounts multiple attempts at fighting back against these tactics. As he reports, Lyudmila Savchuck was a journalist who went undercover at a troll factory – a place where people work to create fake online personas and flood the internet with attacks against viable news stories. Once Savchuck gathered her evidence, her story went out, and the trolls attacked her, labeling her as a “sexual deviant” and a “traitor” to discredit her discoveries (Pomeransteve 2020). Additionally, Camille Francois put together a group of researchers who were trying to tie trolls with illegal activity. These trolls began releasing personal information of these researchers online. Even when this was brought to their attention, the government did nothing (Pomeransteve 2020).

According to Pomeransteve, the public could often agree to policies based on fallacies, manipulation, and lies spread by these bots and trolls rather than agreeing based on the truth. In some cases, the manipulation is blatantly invasive. In Pomeransteve's book, he mentions Cambridge Analytica who could data-mine information from your online presence for the purpose of changing your opinions and actions.

### **Conclusion**

Information plays a key role in the opinions and decision-making of the masses. Without media, consumers would otherwise be blind to the happenings around them. Therefore, the methods utilized to access, report, and distribute information are too important for mishandling. Media needs rules, standards, and a basis behind those rules and standards function. Without each of these regulations, it would be a disorganized and dysfunctional free-for-all, and with too much organization, it would be a controlled, inaccessible nightmare. But what do we do with what we have?

Pomeransteve proposes the idea of making information transparent. There is already one instance of this happening with advertisements on social media. Advertisements or sponsored posts on personal accounts must be obviously disclosed. This principle could stretch beyond ads. For example, social media companies would make their operations, algorithms, and the terms and conditions clear, obvious, and easy to understand. Additionally, social media outlets should become more proactive in removing bots and trolls from their platforms. Lastly, social media companies, and search engines, should create a task force dedicated to tagging potentially untrustworthy pages or sites.

### References

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