

## CHAPTER 2

# Global Communication Theories

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When you travel around the world, you may notice a wide range of communication processes and diverse media practices. But do you ever stop to think why these differences exist? One key tool to help us understand and make sense of different global patterns is communication theory.

Global communication theories provide deeper comprehension and context for existing phenomena. For example, one might notice distinct levels of media freedom between, say, Sweden and Somalia. But why is that the case? How can we explain why two formerly Communist countries, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, vary widely in their media freedom rankings? When we compare recent statistics on online technology use across countries we can observe persistent gaps. Looking at per capita usage rates, for instance, nations on the African continent continue to lag behind in online technology use. As of April 2022, 2.9 billion people do *not* use the Internet, which represents 37% of the world population, with Southern Asia having more than a third of the world’s “unconnected” offline population. But how did that happen, and what does it mean? We need to attempt an explanation, a theory. What did it mean at the turn of the last century and into this one to have a single corporation—News Corporation—own one of the four major TV networks in the United States; Star TV satellite television, which beamed programs to China and India (accounting for more than 40% of the world’s population); a bunch of major newspapers in Britain and Australia; and a whole lot more media besides? Again, we need to attempt an explanation, a theory.

In addition to explaining existing phenomena, theories are important because they can help us understand the world as well as predict what we might expect in the future. In a nutshell, a good theory offers some rules—a system—that can help us make sense of the world while at the same time guiding current action and predicting future outcomes. Indeed, media theories are useful because they inform practice, as Zelizer reminds us:

While the longstanding academic view has been that orienting toward practitioners dumbs down intellectualism, the value of spanning practice and theory goes beyond the somewhat limited exemplar still offered most obviously by law and medicine. And yet, when we consider how much of communication displays an affinity with areas of practice, it becomes clear that our field embodies a far more nuanced set of engagements than has been reflected in scholarship: They include journalism, policy studies, performance studies, public relations, organizational communication, marketing, advertising, and oratory, among others. (p. 414).

According to McQuail and Deuze (2020), there are at least five kinds of theory in the media and communication field: social scientific, cultural, normative, operational, and everyday theory. If we are to understand international media and global communication, we must train ourselves to think through different theories and be able to evaluate them. What follows is a start to doing just that. We begin by critically reviewing the first systematic attempt to analyze media across the planet, the so-called *Four Theories of the Press*. In the second and third sections of the chapter, we examine two different approaches to the same task.

## Normative Theories

One of the earliest attempts to think about media internationally was a book published in the 1950s entitled *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). Its authors set out to produce what is sometimes referred to as a taxonomy, which means dividing up all the various aspects of a topic into systematic categories and sometimes subcategories as well. The taxonomy the authors proposed was that the world's various media systems could be grouped into four categories or models: authoritarian, Soviet, libertarian, and social responsibility. It compared the systems with each other, which in principle makes it easier to see the differences and then to see each system's particular characteristics—all too often, familiar only with the media system with which we grew up, we assume it is the only imaginable way of organizing media communication. Comparisons are interesting not just for what they tell us about the rest of the world. They help us sharpen our understanding of our own nation's media system (see the “Six Normative Theories” box, which cites a leading media scholar's summary of normative theories).

*Authoritarian* effectively meant dictatorial, and the authors had especially in mind the nightmare fascist regimes of Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. *Soviet* referred to the Communist regime at that time in Russia and its surrounding ring of client regimes in Eastern Europe, the Transcaucasus, and Central Asia. The prime difference between the Soviet bloc regimes and “authoritarian” regimes lay, the authors proposed, in the particular political ideology that undergirded the Soviet regimes, namely Communism, which claimed to show the way to construct a just and equal society.

By *libertarian*, the authors meant free market-based, which is the sense of the term in current continental European parlance. The contrast with both of the first two categories was, clearly, between media systems ruled by state regulation and censorship and media systems ruled by capitalist moneymaking priorities. By *social responsibility*, the authors effectively meant a different order of reality again: namely, media operating within a capitalist dynamic but simultaneously committed to serving the public's needs. These needs were for a watchdog on government and business malpractice and for a steady flow of reliable information to help the citizens of a democracy make up their minds on matters of public concern.

A strong underlying assumption in all four models was that news and information were the primary roles of media, a view that rather heavily downplayed their entertainment function and ignored the significant informative and thought-provoking dimensions that entertainment also carries. Indeed, despite the title *Four Theories of the Press*, the book effectively sidelined many types of print media (comics, trade magazines, fashion magazines, sports publications, and so on). Effectively, its primary focus was on the democratic functions of serious, “quality” newspapers and weekly newsmagazines, with their contribution to rational public debate and policy making, from a Western-centric point of view (Dimitrova, 2021). The model the authors endorsed as the best was the social responsibility model.

These theories—of which we shall review two later ones in a moment—were what are called *deontic*, or normative, theories. That is to say, they did not seek simply to explain or contrast comparative media systems but to define how those systems ought to operate according to certain guiding principles. In particular, by touting the social responsibility model as superior, the authors effectively directed attention to what they saw as the highest duties of the media in a democracy. They did not, however, explain why media should follow that model other than the notions that high ethical principles and freedom of the press are good and valuable. Whether

## Six Normative Theories

*Authoritarian* theory can justify advance censorship and punishment for deviation . . . the theory was likely to be observed in dictatorial regimes, under conditions of military rule or foreign occupation and even during states of extreme emergency in democratic societies. Authoritarian principles may even express the popular will under some conditions (such as in a nation at war or in response to terrorism). Authoritarian theory is generally designed to protect the established social order and its agents, setting clear and close limits to media freedom.

The second of the Four Theories . . . was labeled *libertarian*, drawing on the ideas of classical liberalism and referring to the idea that the press should be a “free marketplace of ideas” in which the best would be recognized and the worst fail. In one respect it is a simple extension to the (newspaper) press of the fundamental individual rights to freedom of opinion, speech, religion and assembly. . . . The nearest approximation to truth will emerge from the competitive exposure of alternative viewpoints, and progress for society will depend on the choice of “right” over “wrong” solutions. . . .

*Soviet* theory . . . assigned the media a role as collective agitator, propagandist and educator in the building of communism. . . . The main principle was subordination of the media to the Communist Party—the only legitimate voice and agent of the working class. Not surprisingly, the theory did not favor free expression, but it did propose a positive role for the media in society and in the world, with a strong emphasis on culture and information and on the task of economic and social development. . . .

*Social responsibility* theory involved the view that media ownership and operation are a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than an unlimited private franchise. For the privately owned media, social responsibility theory has been expressed and applied mainly in the form of codes of professional journalistic standards, ethics and conduct or in various kinds of council or tribunal for dealing with individual complaints against the press, or by way of public commissions of inquiry into particular media. Most such councils have been organized by the press themselves, a key feature of the theory being its emphasis on self-regulation. . . .

*Development media* theory . . . was intended to recognize the fact that societies undergoing a transition from underdevelopment and colonialism to independence and better material conditions often lack the infrastructure, the money, the traditions, the professional skills and even the audiences . . . it emphasizes the following goals: the primacy of the national development task (economic, social, cultural and political); the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy; support for democracy; and solidarity with other developing countries. Because of the priority given to these ends, limited resources available for media can legitimately be allocated by government, and journalistic freedom can also be restricted. . . .

*Democratic-participant media* theory . . . supports the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community, interest group or subculture. Both theory and technology have challenged the necessity for and desirability of uniform, centralized, high cost, commercialized, professionalized or state-controlled media. In their place should be encouraged multiple, small-scale, local, noninstitutional committed media which link senders to receivers and also favor horizontal patterns of interaction. . . . Both freedom and self regulation are seen to have failed.

Source: Excerpted from *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (3rd ed.), by D. McQuail, 1994, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Reprinted with permission.

journalists, media executives, or owners actually work by abiding by high ethical standards and journalistic codes, and what might stimulate them to do so, was left unexplained. The social responsibility model was simply a series of ethically inspired decisions by owners and editors for the public good.

The two later categories/models (cf. McQuail, 1994, pp. 131–132) added still further variety. One was the development model; the other, the participatory/democratic model. The development model referred to media that addressed issues of poverty, health care, literacy, and education, particularly in what was once referred to as Third World settings. The media were defined as being vitally responsible for informing the public—for example, about more efficient agricultural methods or about health hazards and how to combat them. Radio campaigns against the spread of HIV and AIDS would be a typical example. Development media were also considered to play a significant role in fostering a sense of nationhood in countries with highly disparate groups in the population, territories often artificially created by European colonialists as recently as the late 19th century. Some still see the development media model as applicable in the so-called Global South (Nakho, 2021).

*Participatory* media, the sixth category/model, is typically designated as local, small-scale, and more democratically organized media, such as community radio stations or public access video, with their staff and producers having considerable input into editorial decisions. This alone sharply distinguished them from mainstream media of all kinds. In addition, participatory media were defined as closely involved with the ongoing life of the communities they served, so their readers or listeners could also have considerable influence over editorial policies. Sometimes, these media shared the same development goals as the previous model cited, but not on any kind of authoritative top-down basis or as agents of government development policies. Public participation and a democratic process were central to their operation.

## Shortcomings of Existing Theories

These six models did indeed cover a great variety of media structures internationally. Whether they did so satisfactorily is another matter. Let us look briefly at some of their shortcomings. Aside from their typical failure to engage with entertainment, as already mentioned, their distinction among Soviet, authoritarian, and development models was very blurred in practice.

For instance, the mechanisms of Soviet and authoritarian media control were often very similar, and many Third World regimes hid behind “development priorities” and “national unity” to justify their iron control over any media critique of their behavior. The libertarian model of free capitalist competition spoke to a bygone age, already vanishing by the time the original *Four Theories* book was published, an age when many small newspapers and radio stations competed with each other. In the current era of global media transnational corporations—giants valued in tens, twenties, or even hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars—it is quaintly archaic to imagine a free media market where all media are on a level playing field. If we were to add technology companies such as Apple, Alphabet (Google), and Meta (Facebook) to the equation, the imbalance is even more pronounced.

But perhaps the chief problem with the four (or six) theories approach goes back to the deontic, or normative, dimension of the theories. The two terms used previously—*categories* and *models*—illustrate this problem, for though they can be synonyms, *model* implies something that ought to be followed. While media, like any cultural organization, clearly do follow certain guiding principles and do not reinvent their priorities day by day, what media executives claim those

principles are and how the same media executives behave in actuality may often be light-years apart. Let's look at some examples.

Communist media in the former Soviet bloc claimed their purpose was to serve the general public, the industrial workers, and the farmers, who made up the vast majority of the population. Yet when the opportunity arose in those countries in the late 1980s, public criticism of the cover-ups and distortions of Communist media became a tidal wave, and what started as small steps to open up the media led to wide-reaching policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, policies introduced by the Soviet political leader at the time, Gorbachev, to open public discussion and restructure society and quickly “escaped” from political control.

The limits of the libertarian press model when it comes to media freedom and performing a watchdog role vis-à-vis the government also become visible in the coverage of conflict and war (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). Even the *New York Times*, the U.S. newspaper of record, published what later became known as incorrect information about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), which was “spoon-fed” to the paper and used as justification for the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Abrams, 2004).

In the social responsibility model, objectivity is trumpeted as the journalists' core principle, the driving force of their daily investigation and writing. Yet as media researchers in a number of countries have demonstrated, journalists readily place patriotism above objectivity and define objectivity in practice as the middle point between two opposing views, often those of rival political parties, not troubling to question whether truth may lie somewhere else. In the 1990s and into the next decade, the pathetic U.S. news media coverage of battles over how to reconstruct the ever more problematic U.S. health care system offered a sadly accurate confirmation of the failure of objectivity once it was defined as the midpoint between the Republican and Democratic parties (Blendon, 1995; Fallows, 1996, pp. 204–234).

As noted, autocratic regimes frequently directed development media to steer away from sensitive topics in the name of national unity and the need to focus on bettering economic production and growth. Even media activists working for peanuts in participatory media sometimes claimed a dedication to “the cause” that masked their own obsession with wielding petty power in their community.

These examples show that media researchers need to penetrate well below the surface of media professionals' assertions that they are driven by distinguished values, such as development, or social responsibility, or the public good, and to examine the full range of forces actually at work in media. Not to do so is hopelessly naive and blots out the prime force in media all across the planet at the beginning of this century: the ferocious elimination, as a result of the worship of market forces, of any ethical values in media, save naked profitability.

## The Importance of Context

Another important consideration here is that media institutions do not function in isolation but are embedded within a national and transnational system. Dimitrova (2021) combines five contextual factors that offer guidance on why different countries' media seem to function in different ways. These factors include political, economic, technological, cultural, and journalistic. An example from the Soviet Union demonstrates how these factors affect media practices within a nation.

Looking at Russian media today offers another lesson in how media dynamics evolve over time and in response to various external pressures. When the Russia–Ukraine War commenced in February 2022, the Russian media were required to call the war “a special military operation,” and

deviations from the official term would be penalized. Indeed, when one of the few independent newspapers in Putin's Russia, *Novaya Gazeta*, printed that there was a war in Ukraine, the paper was stripped of its media license and promptly shut down (Reuters, 2022).

## A Different Approach I: Comparing and Contrasting Media

In this section, we will examine some lessons that can be drawn from the now-extinct Soviet Russian media system in order to understand media internationally, rather than basing our examination on a single nation. The system lasted, in different forms, from the revolution late in 1917 to December 25, 1991, when the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, formally signed a document dissolving the Soviet Union. Many people would agree that some of the USSR's principal features persisted well after that date, with new private banks supplanting the old Communist Party as media bosses. However, although the Soviet media system is extinct in its original form, its history has a lot to contribute to our understanding of media elsewhere in the world.

First, as noted, Soviet media had a strong overlap with media under other dictatorships and with so-called development media. As an illustration, in the first 40 years of Taiwan's existence as an entity separate from mainland China, following the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the media system of Taiwan was that of a dictatorial one-party state (whose leader, Chiang Kai-shek, had been schooled in Soviet Russia). Chiang Kai-shek was fiercely opposed to Communism, but that certainly did not mean he gave his own media any freedom. Another example is India, which was not a dictatorship like Taiwan but a country where, until the beginning of the 1990s, broadcast media were government-owned in the name of national development and unity and where the Soviet model of the state as the basic agency of economic development had held sway ever since independence from British rule in 1947. Thus, the study of Soviet Russian media throws light on a variety of the world's media systems, even though privatizing and liberalizing media are increasingly visible globally as time goes by. (Privatizing and liberalizing are not the same thing, as we will see in the next section.)

Second, those of us who live in economically advanced and politically stable countries are in a poor position to understand how media work on much of the rest of the planet. Most, if not all, of what we read is about research based on the United States or Britain, two nations with a considerable shared culture and the same majority language. We have little information even about media in Canada, France, Germany, Italy, or Japan—the other advanced industrial nations of the elite Group of Seven (G7) countries.

In the world at large, issues of extreme poverty, economic crisis, political instability even to the point of civil war, turbulent insurgent movements, military or other authoritarian regimes, and violent repression of political dissent are the central context of media. To pretend that we can generalize about what all media are by just studying U.S. or British media is wildly silly. Seemingly obvious claims such as “broadcasting is. . .” or “the Internet is. . .” or “the press is. . .” are inaccurate, however authoritative they may look at first glance—not because “every country is a bit different” but because of the major factors named at the beginning of this paragraph.

To be sure, some countries not in the G7 are politically stable and economically affluent (Denmark and New Zealand, for example); even some crisis-torn nations have many positive dimensions that offset their acute problems (the Congo and Indonesia, for example). The media of affluent countries spend so little time on the constructive dimensions of other nations that the

average media user in those countries can be forgiven up to a point for being unaware that there are any. But to return to the basic point here: Russia is a valuable entry point for understanding media in the world at large and thus for avoiding being imprisoned in superficial assumptions about what media are.

At least four important issues must be considered—namely, how we understand the relation of mainstream media to (1) political power, (2) economic crises, (3) dramatic social transitions, and (4) small-scale alternative media (such as *samizdat*, a term explained later in this chapter). Each of the following Russian examples offers a contrast case to the usual U.S. or U.K. profile of media and provokes a basic question about media in capitalist democracies.

## POLITICAL POWER

The relationship between political power and Communist media always seemed a “no-brainer.” Communist media were seen as simple mirror-opposites of media in the West. Communism equaled repression and censorship, in the name of a forlorn ideal of justice, but capitalist democracy (the West) won out in the end, and over the years 1989–1991, the entire Communist system foundered. The Soviet media were the favorite counterexample for proving what was right with Western media.

Now, it is indeed true that state control over media was extremely detailed in Soviet Russia, even more so than in some other dictatorships. The Communist Party’s Propaganda Committee established ideological priorities. Its cell groups in every newspaper, magazine, publishing house, and broadcast channel kept a close watch over any subversive tendencies. Media executives were chosen from a list of party members who had proven their loyalty. And the KGB (the political police) would quickly intervene if any trouble seemed evident or imminent. With all this, the official censorship body, known as Glavlit, had relatively little to do. Typewriters were licensed by the state, and a copy of the characters produced on paper by their keys—which were always slightly out of sync and therefore could be used to identify where a subversive document had originated—was on file with the local KGB. When photocopy machines came into use, access to them was governed in microscopic detail. Bugging technology was one of the most advanced aspects of the Soviet industry.

This outrageous and unnerving machinery of control over communication did not, in the end, win. Many factors served to subvert it, including *samizdat* media (explained later in the chapter). But one factor perhaps was the least controllable of all—namely, the extreme difficulty of producing media that were credible or interesting inside this straitjacket. Communist Party members read *Pravda* (*The Truth*) daily because they knew they were expected to, not because they were convinced it was factually informative. People in general expected authentic news to arrive through conversational rumor and honest opinion from *samizdat*. Only if that rumor confirmed what the Soviet media announced did many people take the latter as reliable (and then only on the given topic).

Thus, in the later decades of the Soviet system in Russia, a dual-level public realm developed: official truths that the media blared out, that everyone mouthed, and that few believed; and an unofficial realism that was the stuff of everyday private conversation, or *samizdat*. When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, intent on reform, he gradually introduced a new degree of frankness and directness in the media (the famous *glasnost* policy), intended to reduce the gap between these two levels. The media credibility dilemma is a significant one in any country. It is fair to say that the less one trusts the official media, the more likely they are to search for alternative news sources.

There is a fascinating contrast between Soviet media and the U.S. case, where the bulk of mainstream media are owned by very large and unaccountable capitalist firms. Do local media enjoy a higher level of public trust because of the lack of direct government control? Were the Soviet media so bluntly and clumsily controlled that skepticism was a self-evident response? Do Western media, which now face their own credibility crisis and accusations of “fake news,” need to worry about maintaining public trust while at the same time keeping their content appealing and their viewership high?

## ECONOMIC CRISIS

Economic crisis was a daily experience for the majority of Russians, especially at the time of the Soviet bloc’s collapse, but it had been gathering momentum from the early 1980s onward. It continues to be a daily experience for citizens in many of the world’s nations. The “Structural Adjustment Policies” of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as the IMF so abstractly termed them over the 1980s and 1990s, blighted the lives of untold hundreds of millions in the countries to which the fund applied its ruthless capitalist logic. The health, housing, and education prospects of children, women, the aged, peasant farmers, and slum dwellers have been sacrificed to the dictates of debt repayment to international banks, to the point that great chunks of national income go back to the banks in interest payments instead of to the public (cf. Barratt Brown, 1997; Stein, 1995).

“It’s their governments’ fault,” cry the public relations specialists of the banks and the IMF, holding up their holy hands in pious denial. Their denial blots out the banks’ full knowledge of what kind of governments they were dealing with at the time they contracted the loans in question: kleptocracies, or thief regimes, that spend a good chunk of the loan on themselves and another chunk on buying weapons from the West’s arms factories to put down civil unrest directed against their rule—or to manufacture wars with their neighbors in order to divert attention from their own abuses.

The Soviet and post-Soviet Russian experience of economic crisis has been profound, except during the 1970s and early 1980s, when oil revenues shot up on the world market. But during the 1990s, Russian life expectancy actually fell, which in turn meant that infant mortality increased, for the death rate among children under one year old is the prime factor in average life expectancy. However, Russian media, until the last few years of the old Soviet Union, were silent about this decline in living standards and stagnation in productivity and asserted that the capitalist countries were suffering from acute and irremediable economic problems. In the post-Soviet period, Russian media have often found it easier to point the finger at the IMF—not, it must be said, without reason—than to take aim at the Russian kleptocracy.

How do media in general deal with these economic crises? Do they explore them or avoid them? Do they blame them on distant scapegoats? On the IMF, if theirs is the country affected? Or on “Third World” governments if they are in an affluent nation? Or on domestic scapegoats—immigrants, Gypsies, Chinese, Jews, refugees, Muslims? It is important for students and observers of the media to understand how these institutions respond to economic crises. How well do they explain strategies to deal with it that do not hit the poor and poorest much harder than the wealthy? Although global indices indicated that living standards in the United States in the 1990s were remarkably high and the crisis was remote, wages had fallen well below what they were in real terms during the 1960s. Typically, both parents had to work full-time to retain a stable income level, and single-parent households, a sizable proportion of the total number of



households, mostly struggled to get by. The U.S. media at the turn of the millennium suggested universal prosperity, but the facts suggested a slow-burning invisible crisis, one in which the public, despite working many hours, was mostly one or two paychecks away from welfare. Yet U.S. media rarely portray the realities of poverty in a compressive manner. When did you last see a TV program, watch an ad, or read a newspaper that got into these realities in a way that struck you?

## DRAMATIC SOCIAL TRANSITIONS

The third issue is the relation of media to dramatic social transitions. Russia went through many transitions in the 20th century, beginning with the disastrous World War I, which opened the way to the 1917 revolution and the three-year civil war that followed the revolution. Next came the tyrannical and savage uprooting of Russian and Ukrainian farmers in 1928–1933 and Stalin’s ongoing terror and vast prison camp population. Then came the loss of 20–25 million lives in the war against Hitler in 1941–1945, the severe economic disruptions of Gorbachev’s attempt to reform the system in the late 1980s, and the economic chaos of the 1990s. This is a dimension that, with the exception of the two world wars, has not characterized the affluent nations’ experience, but once again, Russian experience in this regard has been much more characteristic of the world’s. Colonial rule, invasion, war, vast social movements, civil war, entrenched ethnic conflicts, wrenching changes of government, and dictatorships were common experiences across the planet. The media in Russia also went through many transitions during the 20th century. Let us briefly note them.

Before the 1917 revolution, there was an active newspaper, magazine, and book industry, but it was restricted to people who could read, perhaps a quarter of the population at most, and they were nearly all concentrated in towns. Furthermore, the imperial censorship made it risky indeed for anyone to print anything directly critical of the czars. Jail or exile in frozen Siberia were standard penalties for challenging the status quo, which included, during the war against Germany in 1914–1917, any criticism of the slaughter into which many Russian generals forced their troops. Come the revolution, the Bolshevik leadership sought peace with Germany, and criticism of the old status quo was everywhere. Literacy campaigns began, in part to enable the new revolutionary regime to get its message across. This was the first media transition.

At the time of the revolution, the arts in Russia were in ferment and had been for more than a decade. Some of the most inventive and spectacular artistic work in Europe was being done by a new generation of Russian artists. For the first 10 years or so of the revolutionary era, the new regime actively encouraged these artists to express their talents in theater, advertising, public campaigns, cinema, photography, and music, along with painting and sculpture. The Russian media were on the cutting edge, especially in the then-newer technologies of cinema and photography. However, with the rise of Stalin to power as a Soviet dictator, this innovative work was shoved aside in the name of “Soviet progress.” Those who did not bend to the new orthodoxy suffered, at least, disgrace and, at worst, prison camps or even death. This was the second media transition.

Next, for a period of about 25 years until Stalin’s death in 1953, Russian media marched to the dictator’s tread, looking neither right nor left. Not only did they follow the official line unwaveringly, but their language was also wooden, saturated with political jargon, endlessly grinding out the messages given to them from above. Whenever the official line changed—when Stalin suddenly signed a pact in 1939 with the Nazi regime; when the Nazis invaded in 1941; when the United States supported the USSR in the Lend-Lease program; when, in the aftermath of the

Nazis' defeat, Stalin annexed three Baltic and five east-central European countries, along with a chunk of eastern Germany; when Stalin began a comprehensive anti-Semitic campaign in the years just before he died—each time the media instantly changed their tune to support the switch. George Orwell's famous novel *1984* conveys some taste of the way that media during the Cold War massaged such 180-degree reversals, including the World War II portrayal of Stalin in U.S. media as "friendly Uncle Joe" and the redefinition of him as a monster after the war.

In the decade that followed Stalin's death, some Russian media professionals made cautious attempts to open up the media, with intermittent encouragement from Khrushchev, Stalin's successor. A famous short novel, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was the first publication of anything about the vast prison camp system Stalin had brought into being. It was in some ways the high point of the attempt to open up the media system, even just a little, but in 1964 Khrushchev was thrown out of office, and the lid was jammed back on Russian media. Some other brave dissidents who tried to publish works critical of the regime were sentenced to long terms of hard labor in highly publicized trials meant to scare off any would-be imitators—another media transition.

Only in the mid-1980s, as the Russian economic system began to grind to a halt, was there a push in favor of media reform, the *glasnost* era, led by the USSR's last leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. This ultimately led to an avalanche of media, which challenged the long-established status quo, even to the point, eventually, of attacking the original revolution in 1917 and thus the very foundations of the Soviet system—a further media transition.

Finally, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, yet another media transition emerged: a print media sector mostly allowed to follow its own path and commercial dictates; a TV sector under heavy government surveillance and control; and a radio sector somewhere in-between. Independent media existed to a greater extent than under the Soviet regime, but Russians were still largely deprived of anything approaching a genuinely democratic media system. The grip on media in Putin's Russia is no lighter today after the Russia-Ukraine War outbreak.

This postage-stamp account of Russian media in the 20th century has shown the significant transitions through which they passed. Again, in much of the world, such wrenching changes in media have been an everyday experience. Many specifics might vary, but the Russian experience is not unique. In the stable nations of the West, with the exception of the Nazi era in Europe, this kind of media experience was foreign. But we cannot take that minority experience as typical. If we are to think intelligently about media, the Russian experience is much more the norm. To assume that a particular media system is permanent or normal, that transition is not inherent in media, flies in the face of the media experience of most of humankind in the 20th century.

Media seem so familiar, so much part of the landscape, and so central in the way we entertain ourselves and perceive the world. Yet what does the bewilderingly rapid concentration of media ownership into the hands of giant transnational corporations mean for our media future (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1999)? Is citizen influence over media, despite being an obvious necessity for a true democracy, fated to dwindle slowly and imperceptibly away to nothing? Post-9/11, in the name of defending American national security, the U.S. Patriot Act and other new laws and regulations have stiffened many forms of control over our freedom to communicate. Social media, while keeping us connected 24/7, also allow large corporations and governments to surveil all our actions as individuals as well as the actions of journalists globally.

## A Different Approach II: Globalization and Media

Looking at the national level is then one way to get a better understanding of different media systems. A second, complementary approach is to focus on the current trends toward the globalization of media and other cultural processes. Zooming out to larger dynamic systems where media institutions operate allows us to uncover connections and identify underlying processes that are not immediately obvious to the observer.

The term *globalization* is often used widely and loosely. Sometimes, it signifies structural economic changes. Examples include the global rise of government policies on “liberalization” that push for firms to compete for business in previously state-monopoly sectors such as broadcasting, telecommunications, and water or air travel; and the wave of “privatizations,” selling off state-owned companies to private investors (although sometimes these may simply substitute a privately held monopoly for a state monopoly). The IMF’s Structural Adjustment Policies, referred to in the previous section, included global policies of this nature.

Sometimes, however, globalization is applied as well to, or even instead of, cultural and media processes. An earliest concept with a similar connotation was “cultural imperialism,” itself sometimes reformulated more specifically as “media imperialism.” The basic premise was that the attempted imposition of European culture—via religious conversions, missionary schooling, intensive commercialization, and various forms of media dominated by the colonial powers—went hand in hand with the economic, military, and political expansion of European colonization from 1492 onward into the Americas, Africa, and Asia. In the late 20th century, some began to speak derisively of “coca-colonization,” using the invented word as a condensed image of the spread of specifically U.S. daily culture and everyday products throughout the world. Certainly, if you travel through the planet today, it is easy to see billboards everywhere advertising typical U.S. or other everyday Western firms and their products, such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, KFC, Exxon, Ford, and Sony. It is also common for Hollywood movies to be screened in theaters in Canada, France, Japan, Russia, and many other countries, rather than nationally produced films, and both U.S. and British television are widely marketed overseas, although today Indian “Bollywood” movies, Japanese anime (animated movies), South Korean drama, and Chinese martial arts movies are making their presence felt globally too.

So for some scholars, globalization more or less means Americanization, though many Latin Americans think even this word evidences the problem because why, they ask, should a single country’s cultural and media dominance in the whole hemisphere of the Americas be termed Americanization rather than, perhaps, “U.S.-ization”? No one expects this to actually happen, but the point is a real one.

For others, such as the late Herbert Schiller (1991), an earlier U.S. dominance in global culture and media in the decades after World War II began in the late 20th century to give way to a more multiple form of dominance by transnational corporations, rather than just U.S.-based ones. Japan’s Sony, South Korea’s Samsung, Germany’s Bertelsmann, Spain’s Telefonica, and Brazil’s Globo television company would be examples, although Schiller’s argument went further than that. He argued that transnational corporations today do not necessarily reflect the priorities of their home governments or local publics but rather their varying challenges in the global market. That is why they are truly transnational. Against this, most such companies find the U.S. government very supportive by and large and prefer to keep their home base in the United States.

Other analysts have sharply criticized the “imperialism” school, arguing that it falsely assumes global media audiences are moldable plastic in the hands of global media firms and pointing to research that shows how differently varying audiences around the world react to U.S.

media. These observers are highly skeptical of the notion that global media corporations are able to act like cultural steamrollers, effortlessly flattening out people's cultural values and priorities and turning them into little peas in an Americanized or Westernized cultural pod.

Some from this school claim that people's cultural resistance is proof against cultural invasion, but more commonly, writers of this approach use the terms *hybridization* and *hybridity* to try to capture what they see happening (Pieterse, 2004). In other words, they point to neither flat-out resistance nor pathetic defeat but a merging of different perspectives and values to form a new blended culture. Thus, in the 1990s, Indian Bollywood films began to include scenes shot in the West in order to appeal to the 25 million or so people of Indian origin in the world who live outside India itself, but they retained the dance and song sequences characteristic of Indian movies. Thus too, younger Brazilian musicians often deserted samba and other traditional styles for hip-hop and rap, but they continued to sing in Portuguese and address Brazilian realities in their lyrics. Are Spanglish (Spanish/English) or Hinglish (Hindi/English) resistance to the global dominance of the English language, or its transformation?

A problem with the *hybridity* approach is that it can become rather woolly and vague, content just to say that what is happening is a blend but not to probe further into what kind of blend it is, or why it is that kind of blend, or how rooted or unstable that blend is. Hybridity can become just a quick label to pin on quite subtle and complicated cultural and media processes that need to be understood more deeply. An interesting study by Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) of *regional* cultural dominance, in this case Japan's cultural and media exports to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, takes us very productively into some of the real complexities of hybridization, stressing how the much more cosmopolitan feel of Hong Kong and Taiwan makes young Japanese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong consumers' mutual cultural relations very lively, much more so at the time of his writing than with mainland China. He adds to this equation a historical dimension, namely the contrasting experience of Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945), relatively milder than the barbaric ferocity of Japan's invasion of mainland China (1931–1945), which as a result produced very different everyday responses to Japanese cultural products in the two terrains.

The final theoretical approach to understanding media issues under the heading of globalization is that of Chicago-based scholar Arjun Appadurai (1996). His argument is much larger and more detailed than this, but a key component is his twinning of two factors, media and migration, in analyzing the global media process. In his perspective, the huge process of transnational labor migration that characterized the second half of the 20th century and now this one generated tremendous cultural dislocation *and* expansion of cultural horizons among the migrant communities, the communities they left behind, and the communities they diversified following their arrival. At the same time, he suggests, the expansion of media images and coverage of the rest of the planet opened up many people's eyes to realities beyond their immediate and local experience. It is Appadurai's fusion of the mass movement of actual human beings and the global dissemination of images of the rest of the planet that, by concentrating especially on these two facets, opens up our thinking and prompts us to take very seriously the numerous forms of "diasporic" media that are with us today, whether radio programs of overseas music, foreign-language newspapers, magazines, satellite and cable channels, or websites and various social media channels. (*Diaspora* began as a term to describe the 2,000-year migratory settlement of Jewish peoples, sometimes forced, but is now used more generally to refer to mass migratory settlement.) This foreign media sector is not at all new in principle and was rife in immigrant neighborhoods of U.S. cities from the 1880s onward, but the contemporary range of these media, especially when combined with more affordable air travel to people's countries of origin and the ubiquity of social media, marks

a distinctive new step in our media and more general cultural environment (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001; Karim, 2003).

However, whatever uses we make of these varying theoretical approaches, we need never to lose sight of the further reality that global media and cultural flows are also most often big business, similar to but also at points different from the big business of aerospace, shoes, cars, agriculture, and all other industries. This dynamic takes a variety of forms but is never entirely absent. More often than not, indeed, it is this dynamic that dominates. And it has no compulsion to be people-friendly.

## A Different Approach III: Small-Scale Alternative Media

The term *samizdat media* refers to the hand-circulated pamphlets, poems, essays, plays, short stories, novels, and, at a later stage, audio- and videocassettes (*magnitizdat*) that began to emerge in Soviet Russia and later in other Soviet bloc countries from the 1960s onward. They contained material that was banned by the Soviet regime. Writing, distributing, or possessing these materials carried sentences in hard-labor camps. *Samizdat* contained widely varied messages—some religious, some nationalist, some ecological, some reformist, some revising the myths of official Soviet history, some attacking Soviet policies, some defending citizens victimized by arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. The term *samizdat* literally means “self-published,” in contradistinction to “state-published,” that is, approved by the Soviet regime as “safe.” These micromedia took a long time to make a dent in the Soviet system—more than a generation. But their impact was extraordinary, for up until the last year of the USSR, even when the east-central European regimes had already shaken off Soviet rule, the Soviet Union appeared to be one of those fact-of-life institutions that few observers imagined could collapse. Those Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and others who labored over those decades to create *samizdat*, and often paid a heavy price in jail for their pains, showed amazing spirit, determination, and foresight. They were aided by the foreign shortwave radio stations that broadcast in the region’s languages into Soviet bloc territory: the BBC World Service, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America. These stations would read *samizdat* texts over the air as part of their programming and thus amplified their message outside the major urban centers, which were normally the only places where *samizdat* was circulated. Sometimes, the Soviet bloc governments jammed their broadcasts, but not always.

Historically and comparatively, small-scale radical media of this kind have been common (Downing, 2001). They have been used in the United States from the time of the War of Independence through the abolitionist and suffragist movements to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, right up to global movements in Europe, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere opposing the U.S. war on Iraq. Yet their significant role in slowly rotting away at Soviet power flags their importance in developing our own definition of media. All too often, we mistake size and speed for significance, as if they were the only way that media can wield power. In relation to the dizzying speed with which transnational corporations are merging media ownership, it is all too easy to slip into a fatalistic acceptance that these colossuses are too much for us to take on. Yet the *samizdat* story and its parallels in many other parts of the world suggest a diametrically different conclusion, one that begins to put media power in our hands instead of governmental, corporate, or religious leaders’ hands.

The recent Iranian protests illustrate the power of individual resistance facilitated through social media in a globalized world. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran was sparked by anger at the murder of Mahsa Amini, who was detained by the Iranian morality police for

wearing her headscarf “incorrectly” and later died in the hospital. This led to widespread street protests against the Islamic regime *all across* Iran and created an irreversible social resistance movement not only about gender norms but also about education, poverty, insecurity, and unemployment (Bazafkan, 2023). Women in different corners of the globe joined the Iranian movement in solidarity by symbolically cutting a piece of their hair on camera and sharing this action via social media. What does this example demonstrate about the power of ordinary citizens to effect change—even within authoritarian societies? How can individuals living outside those nations show support and exert pressure from Western governments? What can other social movements learn from the Iranian protests in order to achieve local as well as global impact?

## Conclusions

This chapter provided an overview of the six leading global communication theories and their shortcomings. It is important to acknowledge that traditional communication theories originated in the Global North and, as such, may have limited applicability in other regions. The communication field as a whole can benefit from a deeper understanding and broader geographic representation of communication ontologies originating in the Global South (Mutsvairo et al., 2021). Indeed, “qualifying theory by insisting on its clear geographic contours can help make clear the expansive and limiting appeal that theory may have” (Zelizer, 1995, p. 414). Country comparisons, globalization processes, and small-scale alternative media developments need to remain central to future global communication studies.

For a theory to be useful, it needs to be able to stand the test of time and take into account the complexity of contextual factors affecting media institutions. Moving forward, theoretical propositions should incorporate more nuance and common points of reference based on integrating existing knowledge from a wide range of disciplines.

Key terms and subject searches: mass communication theories, normative theories, participatory media, Communist media, social transitions, alternative media, globalization, cultural imperialism, hybridity.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Which of the six theories presented in the chapter makes most sense to you, and why?
2. Compare and contrast the media systems in two nations that fall under different normative theories.
3. What are the main shortcomings of deontic, or normative, theories of media?
4. How does a study of Russian media, whether during or since the 1917–1991 Soviet era, help us understand our own media system more clearly?
5. Can you identify a current example where political factors significantly impacted media developments in any nation?
6. How do our own news media present economic crises, either at home or in other parts of the planet?
7. What is one recent globalization trend that you have observed influencing the media in your country?
8. How did the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* affect Soviet society?

9. What roles may diasporic, alternative, or underground media play in energizing active democracy and social movements?
10. How can the Iranian protest “Woman, Life, Freedom” inform our discussion about the power and the limitations of social media?

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