

FIGURE 10.5

The Media and Government

The Media and Government

No institution as sizable and influential as the mass media can escape involvement with government and politics. The media are not only channels for the transmission of political information and debate, but also significant players with a direct stake in government's regulatory and economic policies, as well as government's attitude toward free speech and dissent.

Accordingly, the third theme of this book is that *the way a country's political system is organized affects the way the media within that country operate*. Media systems can be divided into those that allow dissent and those that do not. To categorize the political organization of media systems, scholars often begin with the 1956 book *Four Theories of the Press*, by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm. These four theories, which were originally used to describe the political systems under which media operated in different countries, were: (1) the Soviet theory, (2) the authoritarian theory, (3) the libertarian theory, and (4) the social responsibility theory.

The Soviet Theory

Historically in the Soviet Union, the government owned and operated the mass media. All media employees were government employees, expected to serve the government's interests.

Top media executives also served as leaders in the Communist party. Even when the press controls loosened in the 1980s under *glasnost*, the mass media were *part* of the government's policy. Under the Soviet theory, government control came *before* the media published or broadcast; the people who controlled the media reviewed copy and looked at programs before they appeared.

This description of the Soviet press system was conceived before the events of the 1990s challenged the basic assumptions of Soviet government. Many Eastern bloc countries, such as Romania and Czechoslovakia, which

once operated under Soviet influence, based their media systems on the Soviet model. Today, the media systems in these countries are in transition.

The Authoritarian Theory

Media that operate under the authoritarian theory can be either publicly or privately owned. This concept of the press developed in Europe after Gutenberg. Until the 1850s, presses in Europe were privately owned, and the aristocracy (who governed the countries) wanted some sort of control over what was printed about them. The aristocracy had the financial and political power necessary to make the rules about what would be printed.

Their first idea was to license everyone who owned a press so the license could be revoked if someone published something unfavorable about the government. The first colonial newspapers in America, for example, were licensed by the British crown. Licensing wasn't very successful in the United States, however, because many people who owned presses didn't apply for licenses.

The next authoritarian attempt to control the press was to review material after it was published. A printer who was discovered publishing material that strongly challenged the government could be heavily fined or even put to death.

Today, many governments still maintain this type of rigid control over the media. Most monarchies, for example, operate in an authoritarian tradition, which tolerates very little dissent. Media systems that serve at the government's pleasure and with the government's approval are common.

The Libertarian Theory

The concept of a libertarian press evolved from the idea that people who are given all the information on an issue will be able to discern what is true and what is false and will make good choices. This is an idea embraced by the writers

FIGURE 10.5

The Media and Government (*continued*)

of the U.S. Constitution and by other democratic governments.

This theory assumes, of course, that the media's main goal is to convey the truth and that the media will not cave in to outside pressures, such as from advertisers or corporate owners. This theory also assumes that people with opposing viewpoints will be heard—that the media will present all points of view, in what is commonly called the free marketplace of ideas.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution concisely advocates the idea of freedom of the press. Theoretically, America today operates under the libertarian theory, although this ideal has been challenged often by changes in the media industries since the Constitution was adopted.

The Social Responsibility Theory

This theory accepts the concept of a libertarian press but prescribes what the media should do. Someone who believes in the social responsibility theory believes that members of the press will do their jobs well only if periodically reminded about their duties.

This theory grew out of the 1947 Hutchins Commission Report on the Free and Responsible Press. The commission listed five goals for the press, including the need for truthful and complete reporting of all sides of an issue. The commission concluded that the American press' privileged position in the Constitution means that the press must always work to be responsible to society.

If the media fail to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply. In this way the libertarian and the social responsibility theories differ. The libertarian theory assumes the media will work

well without government interference; the social responsibility theory advocates government oversight for media that don't act in society's best interest.

Since 1956 when the four theories first were used to describe media systems, critics have contended that these theories are too limiting and that the categories cannot nearly describe all the world's media. In fact, many countries today combine elements of one or more types of media systems.

Developmental Theory

A fifth description for media systems that can be added to describe today's media has been called the *developmental* or Third World theory. Under this system, named for the developing nations where it is most often found, the media *can* be privately owned, but are usually owned by the government. The media are used to promote the country's social and economic goals, and to direct a sense of national purpose. For example, a developmental media system might be used to promote birth control or to encourage children to attend school. The media become an outlet for certain types of government propaganda, then, but in the name of economic and social progress for the country.

Although the theory that best describes the American media is the libertarian theory, throughout their history the American media have struggled with both authoritarian and social responsibility debates: Should the press be free to print secret government documents, for example? What responsibility do the networks have to provide worthwhile programming to their audiences? The media, the government, and the public continually modify and adjust their interpretations of just how the American media should operate.¹⁰

¹⁰Text material from S. Biagi, *Media/Impact: An Introduction to Mass Media*, updated 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), pp. 25–28. Used with permission.