COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Social Responsibility Theory

Social responsibility theory is one response to the perceived impasse of classical liberalism in the twentieth century. Coalescing in the report of the Hutchins Commission in 1947, social responsibility theory takes seriously many of the accusations of critics (from both left and right) of a laissez-faire media system. These critics contend that there are tendencies toward monopolization in the media, that the people or the public are inattentive and not concerned with the rights or interests of those unlike themselves, and that commercialization produces a debased culture and a dangerously selfish politics. In response, social responsibility theory proposes that the media take it upon themselves to elevate their standards, providing citizens with the sort of raw material and disinterested guidance they need to govern themselves. It is urgent that the media do this, social responsibility theorists warn, or an enraged public will allow, if not force, the government to take steps to regulate the media.

The media have both repudiated and embraced social responsibility theory. When *A Free and Responsible Press*, the report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press (the official name of the Hutchins Commission), appeared, its elaborate rethinks of liberal theory were denounced by industry organizations such...
as the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) and others as an entering wedge for government control of the media. At the same time, the notion of "responsibility" appealed to the media on a commonsense level, and in the intervening half century, most of the specific recommendations of the Commission have become mainstays of the workplace culture of journalists, who after all have long had an interest in upgrading their public image and professional status.

This chapter presents a series of arguments about the origins, merits, and shortcomings of social responsibility theory. One argument is that this theory has been adopted in practice (if not in theory) because developments in society, politics, and the media all made it appropriate. This implies that there is really no novelty in the situation—no new idea under the sun, so to speak. Social responsibility theory amounts to a sterile intellectual exercise, on the one hand, and an apparently spontaneous ideological development, on the other.

But we might argue that there is a serious intellectual battle being fought around the concept of responsibility. In this view, the adoption of social responsibility theory means a radical reconstruction of the relationship between individuals and communities, with a new emphasis on the latter. Social responsibility theory thus represents the triumph of community over the lone individual.

This begs the argument from the liberal perspective that responsibility is just a nice name for authoritarian regulation. In terms of the paradigm of *Four Theorists*, social responsibility theory should be seen as aligned with the authoritarian and Soviet communist theories as permutations of collectivism, all quite mimetic to liberal thought.

This argument in turn begs a rebuttal from the left. Rather than being a true communitarianism, and rather than posing a serious threat to class and corporate control of the media, social responsibility theory actually endorses the status quo by erecting standards of performance that can make monopoly media seem like the voice of the people, even as the media keep the people silent and stupid.

Of course, all of these arguments presuppose a media system with bottlenecks everywhere. Responsibility, after all, can be exercised only by those with some kind of power. We expect the publishers of newspapers with circulations in the hundreds of thousands and the producers of television shows with audiences in the tens of millions to be responsible in a way that we do not require of soapbox orators. But suppose the future is the soapbox? Many claim that that will be the likely outcome of innovations in telecommunications technology—the information superhighway will have no bottleneck. Will responsibility be a thing of the past?

Finally, the chapter considers the peculiar situation of advertising. Often demonized as the corruptor of media and citizens, the advertising industry has had a long dalliance with responsibility as a concept. But advertising must embrace market liberalism in its content—it will be biased and will try to promote particular behaviors beneficial to particular private interests. Is responsible advertising an oxymoron?

**Responsibility, Yes, Theory, No?**

Social responsibility theory was formulated at a time when the United States was coming to terms with what commentators have called "late capitalism" and, in retrospect, it may have been only a reaction to changing public expectations. Prior to World War II, many of the most prestigious news organizations in the United States had come under the dominance of wealthy media tycoons, such as William Randolph Hearst, Robert R. McCormick, and Henry Luce. These powerful and successful media owners controlled large newspapers, wire services, radio stations, movie studios, and magazines. They were politically active and used their positions to support candidates and influence elections and legislative action. At the same time, the fed
eral government's power was increasing drastically. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal dealt with the crises of depression and world war by instituting new programs that both expanded the influence of federal government and altered public attitudes toward government's relationship with the private sector. Roosevelt's liberal spending policies also earned him the animosity of most wealthy media figures, who abhorred big government. Roosevelt, in turn, used their virulent opposition to stir public sympathy for his presidency.

Social responsibility theory was developed just after Roosevelt's death, when influential publishers were unpopular with the public. The public remained suspicious of the press, even though new industry leaders were replacing the older, more politically active ones, the press had been formulating "codes of ethics" for decades (the American Society of Newspaper Editors [ASNE] adopted its "Canons of Journalism" in 1933), and television was becoming the most popular medium in the country.

The story of the Hutchins Commission is a familiar one (Blanchard 1977, McIntyre 1987). It was formed in the midst of World War II when Henry Luce, publisher of Time and Life magazines, asked his old Yale classmate, Robert Maynard Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, to recruit a commission to inquire into the proper function of the media in modern democracies. This issue had become urgent for a number of reasons, including the vigorous atmosphere of press criticism of the past few decades, the outbreak of the war, widespread fears of propaganda and totalitarianism, and the expected rise of a generation of new media technologies in the postwar world. The Commission, which consisted mostly of academics with a connection either to Yale or the University of Chicago, deliberated for four years and interviewed dozens of important figures from the media, government, and the academy before issuing its landmark report in 1947.

The Hutchins Commission worked in the context of national and global social change. The Commission's suggestions, while mirroring the public's distaste for powerful media owners, also seemed to reflect a growing expectation for social change. In fact this call for change actually took a firmer hold in the years to come. Civil rights demonstrations spread throughout the South in the next decade, and legislative and judicial successes followed. Changes in public attitudes affected African Americans but also touched the lives of many disenfranchised groups. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a spontaneous women's rights movement took aim at male-dominated societal values and norms. American Indians, gays, Hispanics, and other groups, who were oppressed or denied equal opportunities by mainstream society, also sought general public acceptance of their cultures, ideas, and status as equal partners in society and the workplace.

By the 1960s, within a decade after the publication of Four Theories, media began to reflect new societal standards, not only by opening channels and pages to alternate ideas but by supplementing all male, white staffs with women and minorities. By their very backgrounds, many of these new journalists seemed to offer fresh perspectives. Since early in the nineteenth century, minority publications had served as voices for their respective communities, but now it was expected that integrated news staffs would bring the minority agenda into the white community, keeping minority issues in front of community leaders and decision makers.

Media were also alert to the movements of government. The federal government had already exercised some control over broadcast content, later, local governments similarly asserted their rights in bargaining with new cable companies. The fear of censorship repeatedly led Hollywood to display its "responsibility," most recently through the ratings system.

While not responding necessarily to government mandates, newspapers and magazines realized that a new, younger, better educated, post-World War II audience wanted less politically biased news coverage and more interpretive writing. Audiences also looked for publications that reflected a wide spectrum of ideas in the community and the nation. This audience demand could not be ignored. The Chicago Tribune is a case in point.
Clayton Kirkpatrick, who eventually succeeded Robert McCormick as editor of the Chicago Tribune (McCormick died in 1955 and Kirkpatrick became editor in 1969), recalled that drastic changes at the historically conservative and politically charged newspaper had to take place or the Tribune would not have survived the 1970s. The Tribune and most influential magazines and newspapers did change, eliminating blatant political bias from news pages and opening their op-ed columns to various shades of opinion.

In general, major newspapers and magazines became more audience oriented. News was more interpretive, consumer, business, and lifestyle news competed with political news for space in newspapers and magazines. In the 1970s, many newspapers experimented with consumer advice columns and help lines. Newspaper managers not only allowed publication of a variety of letters to the editor and opinion or commentary columns but also instituted regular correction to set straight published, factual errors. Publishers appointed ombudsmen to hear complaints from readers. By the last decade of the twentieth century, few newspapers or magazines arrogantly devoted their energies to hyping certain political parties or candidates favored by wealthy media owners and instead, turned to reader surveys to learn more about what the community or nation wanted to read. Conservatives argued that a new, liberal bias dominated the nation's most prestigious media during this new era of news coverage but in fact newspapers and magazines were far more stringent in seeking news and editorial balance than they had been fifty years earlier.

It would seem on the surface, then, that the social responsibility theory not only existed but that the formulation of such a concept appeared ever more prescient as each decade passed. But the question remains: Is this social responsibility theory so radically different from liberal theory, does it really embody new concepts, or is it merely an evolutionary descendant of classical liberal doctrines, not really so new in its purposes and goals?

From the moment the U.S. Constitution was ratified, newspapers never really developed into the public spirited vehicles envisioned by men like Thomas Jefferson. They were often mean spirited and consumed by political bias but they evolved over the next two centuries to concentrate on news and advertising. The definition and presentation of news also evolved. Fairness and balance coupled with a more objective writing style came to be accepted as the rule, instead of fiery opinion and rhetoric. It is this style that we usually recognize as "responsible journalism." When, then, did the social responsibility theory overtake the libertarian theory? With the era of the mass circulation press? When the rise of advertising made newspapers financially independent of political parties in the late nineteenth century? When Joseph Pulitzer turned the New York World into a mass appeal, working-class paper in the 1880s? With the sensational revelations of the reformist muckrakers in the early twentieth century? When radio brought news instantly into living rooms in the 1920s? When Roosevelt declared war on influential media owners?

Vestiges of social responsibility can be found all along the way before the Hutchins Commission. But who is to say this was social responsibility rather than just good business? Pulitzer earned a fortune by publishing a newspaper devoted to working class men and women but treated his own working reporters and editors shamefully. While bringing the world into American living rooms, radio maintained editorial neutrality but devoted almost all its airtime to entertainment, thus avoiding controversy and slighting serious presentation of the news. Media came to seem responsible without embracing the totality of social responsibility theory.

The Radical Nature of Responsibility

We might, then, understand social responsibility theory as a limited adjustment in liberalism brought about by perceived busi
ness demands. But such a reading neglects any analysis of the ideas and justifications behind this adjustment. In order to assess social responsibility theory's importance, we must take a closer look at the fundamental concepts that intellectually shaped it.

In a seminal essay in 1958, Sir Isaiah Berlin differentiated negative and positive liberty as two streams in democratic political philosophy—two models distinguishing John Locke from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Berlin observed that liberal politics avoids schizophrenia by a compromise in everyday affairs, placing positive freedom in the service of its negative counterpart "Perhaps the chief value for liberals of political—positive—rights, of participating in the government, is as a means of protecting what they hold to be an ultimate value, namely individual—negative—liberty" (Berlin [1958] 1969, 165) 1

Positive freedom is the conceptual axis around which social responsibility revolves. The legal implications of positive freedom were developed by Zecheriah Chafee in his two volume Government and Mass Communications (1947). Chafee's contribution to neoliberal jurisprudence was considered in the previous chapter, in his emphasis on rights and in his suspicions of government action. Chafee's connections to the liberal tradition are clear. His influence on the Hutchins Commission was balanced by William Ernest Hocking (McIntyre 1987), a philosopher whose reformulations of the concepts of freedom and rights as moral (rather than natural or utilitarian) constituted the philosophical core of the Commission's final report. Chafee's work had more practical impact than Hocking's, especially in First Amendment law, and Chafee prevailed over Hocking in restricting the Commission's endorsement of government intervention to promote responsibility. But Hocking remains the most distinctive and innovative contributor to the Commission's work, he is largely responsible for any element of radical change in the final report.

The logic and rationale of positive freedom are the center-piece of William Ernest Hocking's foundational book, Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principle (1947). Hocking developed in this volume a definition of freedom distinctive from classical liberalism where (negative) liberty means the absence of arbitrary restraint. In the political theory underlying classical liberalism, individuals possess an inner citadel that is inviolate and, therefore, they must be left alone to pursue those ends each considers right or sacred. To contravene these natural rights, from this perspective, is to violate the self's autonomy.

Liberalism's notion of individualistic, negative liberty has typically been contrasted with social responsibility theory in terms of jurisprudence and governmental policy. These debates over policy, shield laws, Freedom of Information probes and Supreme Court rulings, however, obscure social responsibility's more critical challenge to defend its view of freedom philosophically. The question is whether positive freedom can be reconstructed in terms of the nature of human being. Hocking developed an intellectually rich notion of positive freedom, though it has been largely ignored. Endless fussing about functional matters such as government intrusion prevents a more fundamental analysis of liberty's character. The vitality of social responsibility at this juncture depends more on conceptually recovering positive freedom than on winning debates over journalistic strategy.

William Ernest Hocking

Hocking himself believed that negative freedom had gone to seed on the empirical level. In "The Future of Liberalism," a 1935 symposium called by the American Philosophical Association, he exposed its pernicious side in the twentieth century. While Hocking recognized that freedom from coercion has provided a significant constraint against undue government encroachment, he also was concerned that a theory of free expression as an individual right did not resolve certain fundamental
disagreements that have arisen in Anglo American history. For instance, on what grounds can defenders of negative liberty motivate citizens to take long term goals seriously? Presuming that a viable social order cannot merely lurch along from day to day, negative liberty does not inspire us with a durable vision of the future. Hocking also contended that a visceral commitment to negative freedom allows the press as a social institution to be co-opted by instrumentalism and professional privilege. (On the other hand, positive freedom is said by its critics to encourage government interference, though Hocking’s Freedom of the Press itself never condones political intervention, and the Hutchins Commission report, which reflects Hocking’s argumentation, considers the government only as a “residual legatee” of last resort.)

Hocking insisted, to the agreement of the commissioners as a whole, that liberty cannot be distinguished from the conditions of its existence. In his role as the Commission’s principal philosopher, Hocking contended that freedom of expression was not an inalienable natural right but an earned moral right. Hocking’s Freedom of the Press is a carefully reasoned argument that liberty—given our status as social beings—is not unconditional but involves the necessity of assuming and performing duties beyond self-interest. While errors are inevitable, wrongdoing cancels the rationale for freedom. Positive freedom is a defining feature of our humanness but must constantly be etched out of our tendency to serve ourselves rather than use our liberty for the common good.

Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principle brought into focus two of Hocking’s earlier classics, The Meaning of God in Human Experience (1912) and Human Nature and Its Reworking (1918). Together they provide an ontological basis on which to rest both freedom and responsibility. Rather than a doctrine of individual autonomy, Hocking turns both terms on their head—substituting a communitarian intersubjectivity for individualism, and freedom to serve for a protectionist autonomy.

Inter-subjectivity is Hocking’s label for contending that all persons, as subjects of one divine being, are interrelated by the very fact of their common integration prior to any space-time communication. Through intersubjectivity he makes community the gateway to an understanding of persons. For Hocking personhood entails a region beyond our individual selves possessed in common with others and sustained by a universal life force. The self, community, and universal humanness are interdependent and cosexual. Throughout Hocking’s three classics, he argues that the philosophy of the person is basically a philosophy of being. At the highest level, being is fundamentally personal. His last published work is a review of Martin Buber’s writing, in which he emphasizes with Buber the idea that finite humans are not discrete in themselves but relational to other beings and to divine Being (Hocking 1964, 45–47).

Freedom needs, in Hocking’s view, an intellectual home with in the nature of being itself. He seeks a formulation in which freedom is compatible with, but not necessarily bound to or defined by, any one particular culture or sociopolitical system. Through the concept of positive freedom he develops a rigorous philosophical context in which responsibility becomes not just an archaic survivor from a pre-scientific age but a constituent part of a metaphysics of human being. Hocking outlines what might be called an ontology of the rational agent whose socially responsible acts are not mere appearances but prima facie duties as the law and our self-awareness testify. With great subtlety, he thereby frees us from a dilemma inherent in the negative liberty model—does it entail self-abnegation or self-realization? In fact, Hocking is a forerunner of the communitarian challenge rather than being content with equitable democratic processes per se, he helps establish a conceptual basis for the common good.

Hocking’s Intellectual Tradition

If we take seriously the history of ideas and culture, has freedom’s limited scope ever been successfully contradicted? Even John Stu
art Mill accepted restraints, such as forcibly preventing people from crossing a collapsing bridge if no time is left to warn them. Western thought has generally acknowledged that freedom—of speech, for instance—cannot be considered an unconditional right without creating injustices in other areas. Student claims that human beings are a law unto themselves have always foundered against a more articulate accountable freedom.

A notable example is John Milton, who is typically understood as the prototype libertarian advocating an unfettered marketplace of ideas. His defense of liberty—as we argued in Chapter 2—was animated by a concern with liberty of conscience, he made claims based on virtue’s prerogatives rather than Lockean natural rights. By entering virtue deeply into freedom’s definitional fiber, Milton added permanently to the intellectual agenda. (Only Hocking’s preoccupation with the Areopagitica while ignoring Milton’s political pamphlets as a whole—the mischievous penchant of most press theory historians—prevents him from integrating Milton solidly into his own work three hundred years after Milton [Christians and Fackler 1980].) Responsibility, or something like it, then, has often if not always accompanied liberty in the Western tradition.

Building a theory of freedom is a complicated, multileveled enterprise. But the question of justifying the basis for moral judgments and public policy must be answered in any schema. And the justificatory ground within social responsibility theory as Hocking conceived it is the nature of human being. More than three decades ago, Paul Tillich echoed a similar conclusion: “The roots of the moral imperative, the criteria of its validity, the sources of its contents, the forces of its realization, all this can be elaborated only in terms of an analysis of man’s being and universal being. There is no answer in ethics without an explicit or implicit assertion about the nature of being” (1954, 73). The foundation for the strongest possible notion of accountability is the nature of human being itself, compatible with but not necessarily bound to or defined by any one particular culture or sociopolitical system. Thus, he advocates a metaphysics of being in which human life is not merely a constituent part but the epicenter.

Certainly our moral possibilities are grounded in our freedom. Actions cease to be moral if humankind is unfree—true enough. The debate revolves around the nature of freedom, not its centrality. Hocking and his circle develop the foundation for a radical, positive freedom, accountable freedom, human freedom with responsibility as its integrating center. Graham Haydon (1978, 46) refers to this moral outlook as an “ethics of responsibility,” a view of “virtue-responsibility” required of human beings without reference to roles. Advocates of an ethic of responsibility “treat the requirement of responsibility as an ever present moral demand, necessarily incumbent upon any person qua person (or qua moral agent) prior, logically, to particular responsibilities.” Thus, obligations to fulfill our task or role duties are not the fundamental element in the moral life that many philosophers suggest. Our obligations receive their significance by virtue of responsible persons taking them seriously when they are working on the job or using their expertise in some direct way.

Even so radical a utilitarian as John Stuart Mill captured a glimmer of the primacy of humanity over our roles. “Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers, and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians” (1867, 388). Because of the fundamental and abiding character of our being responsible selves first of all, journalists, managers, advertisers, scientists, government workers, teachers, and so forth should operate with a sense of collective responsibility issuing from their humanity. In fact, much of what we mean by enlarging the scope of our accountability entails that our duties as experts become so intertwined with our communal relationships that our thinking and action are inseparably shaped by both our expertise and our basic humaness.
While grounding positive freedom in our unassailable humanness is the correct move intellectually, it is obvious that the nature of the self is itself philosophically problematical at present. Our preoccupation with epistemology in the modern age often blinds us to anthropology’s importance and has left us with only minimal vocabulary for analyzing the self. Avoiding the old conundrums of natural law and fixed human nature has often been deemed sufficient. But in identifying the problematic subject determined by the power/knowledge structures of late capitalism, the poststructuralists typify a reawakening concern at present. An explicit philosophy of responsible being, however, refuses to surrender human centeredness to the de-centered subject of postmodernism. To this debate, Hacking speaks with ongoing relevance.

“Positive Freedom” as the “Entering Wedge”

While communitarians welcome “responsibility” and “positive freedom” as an expansion of the realm of liberty, libertarians are wary. In terms of libertarian thought, the philosophical underpinnings of social responsibility theory are indeed radical. But their import in practice is really very familiar. “Responsibility” must mean accountability, accountability requires state intervention, and state intervention, history shows, comes at the expense of liberty as defined by libertarians. Their argument follows.

Social responsibility theory, in one sense, is difficult to criticize. Taken at its most benign, who could oppose the goal of an honest, industrious, conscientious press committed to the free flow of all information necessary to self-government? The goal is admirable—but it is also consistent with classical liberal or libertarian theory.

This leads to the first criticism of social responsibility theory: its name. Its authors leave the negative inference that any other theory is socially irresponsible. Libertarian theory did not condone abuse of liberty and it, too, sought to further the public interest. The distinction, though, is one of procedure and presuppositions. According to James Madison who crafted what libertarians hold to be their classic statement of principles, the Furst Amendment “Some degree of abuse is inseparable from the proper use of everything, and in no instance is this more true than in that of the press. It has accordingly been decided by the practice of the States, that it is better to leave a few of its noxious branches to their luxuriant growth, than, by pruning them away, to injure the vigour of those yielding the proper fruits” ([1787] 1941, 570).

But where a libertarian might expect the public interest to be fulfilled in the long run by emphasizing the private, individual interest in each case (e.g., Wortman 1800, 140–48), a neoliberal (as Jay Jensen [1957, 167] termed those espousing social responsibility theory) looks to the public interest. With its emphasis on a variable public interest and ad hoc analysis, neoliberal theory is decidedly short-term in its approach. “Freedom for the thought that we hate” is more easily defensible if focusing on the individual speaker’s freedom from government, in other words, negative liberty (United States v. Schwimmer 279 U.S. 644, 655 [1929, Holmes, dissenting]). But under neoliberal theory the burden is on the speaker in each case to justify freedom for such speech as in the public interest, and that can be a hard sell. Imagine a speaker trying to convince an audience that freedom for speech even though offensive by definition to it is in its best interest.

The fundamental distinction between the two theories regards their contrary attitudes toward speakers and government. According to libertarians, government is the “chief foe of liberty,” as Theodore Peterson noted (FT 76), and the government that governs least, governs best. But where libertarians are concerned primarily with abuses by government, neoliberals seem more concerned with abuses by corporations and other nongovernment entities. Roberto Mangabeira Unger notes that in "postliberal" society, "private organizations are increasingly rec
ognized and treated as entities with the kind of power that tra
ditional doctrine viewed as the prerogative of government" (1976, 199) Neoliberals do not share libertarians' skepticism to
ward government and, instead, concentrate on the power they
see exercised by, in the present instance, the mass media and
their deficiencies, indeed dangers, in exercising that power. For
example, when Peterson listed the themes of twentieth-century
criticism of the press, first among them was the criticism that
it had 'wielded its enormous power for its own ends' (FT 78).
Peterson cited the report of the Hutchins Commission as a pri-
mary authority for developing and giving impetus to social re-
sponsibility theory (FT 75).

The Hutchins Commission based its call for responsibility
on what libertarians consider to be an exaggerated sense of the
power of the media. In its report, the Commission noted often
that continued misuse of press power and freedom would ne-
cessitate regulation (1947, 3, 5, 11, 48–51). Regulation was thus
the fault of the press, not the government, as a libertarian would
contend.

Ideas do have a certain power, but the press rarely has the
kind of power ascribed to it. Those critical of press power al-
most always are guilty of attempting to divert attention from
other matters, ignoring other influences, or in essence wishing
the press would use its supposed power to support their point
of view—an argument about content more than power. As
Walter Karp (1985) has pointed out, however, even the press fos-
ters the concept of press power. As long as the press is depen-
dent on advertising for its subsidy, the press is well advised to
perpetuate the notion that it is inordinately persuasive. Karp
added that it behooves those with real power—the politici-
ans and others who can actually declare war, raise taxes, and im
prison or execute wrongdoers—to comply in the myth of press
power. Such complicity in perpetuating the myth diverts atten-
tion and accountability for their own actions.

Even assuming a considerable power of the press, though,
why should regulation follow? A convincing case can be made
that a powerful press is advisable as a check on government. For
government to regulate the press would negate the check, not
to mention place more power in the government, which clearly
is already powerful.

The Commission indicated numerous times that it preferred
nonregulation and that governmental involvement posed its own
risks for freedom. But its reservations usually accompanied re-
monstrances that there was no other option if the agencies of
mass communication did not live up to their potential on their
own (3, 5, 11, 80, 86, 91, 131). The Commission posed self regu-
lation as a possibility—the ideal even—but at the same time
made clear what it saw as the inherent obstacles to that ideal in
the nature of competitive, profit-oriented, mass market media.

We are reminded of former Vice President Spiro Agnew's 1969
Des Moines speech in which he expressly repudiated regulation
of the broadcast media while the remainder of his remarks on
their incredible power seemingly left no other remedy. Was the
Commission's rejection of government regulation simply for the
sake of "plausible deniability"?

The Commission was in fact ambiguous about the amount of
governmental interference it would countenance. It adopted
member Harold Lasswell's suggestion that it endorse both neg-

ative and positive liberty. The former, which is integral to lib-
ertarian theory, is associated with the absence of government,
"freedom from", but "freedom for" furthering the public's in-
terest must be facilitated by some entity, presumably govern-
ment. One view presumes a passive government, the other an
active government.

This tension, if not outright contradiction, is treated more
candidly in Peterson's summary in Four Theories but the Com-
mision treats the two attitudes toward government as if they
were complementary. This blithe conjunction of opposites may
say more about the nature of committee work than about the
ory itself, where different elements must be appealed in the final
report. Negative liberty, however, is not what is left over after the government has decided when it must intervene to facilitate the public interest. The government’s failure to intervene can be a denial of positive liberty.

A speaker exercising negative liberty is free to further his or her own agenda. A speaker exercising positive liberty is free, with the government’s assistance, to further the public interest—but opportunities for freedom of speech not in the public interest need not be created regardless of the speaker’s interest in the speech. In a statement that could well be the credo of neoliberalism, Alexander Meiklejohn wrote that it was essential “not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said” (1948, 25). Commission member William E. Hocking wrote that censorship was appropriate to prevent “diseducation” from speech that is only of negative worth (1947, 191–93). That is consistent with Meiklejohn’s formulation of positive liberty but inconsistent with negative liberty.

The Commission’s preference for positive liberty is implicit in the title of its report, A Free and Responsible Press. A libertarian might well point that freedom includes the right to be irresponsible. George Hay, for example, wrote in 1799 that, both before and after the First Amendment, freedom meant “the total exemption of the press from any kind of legislative control” no matter how false or scandalous its expression. For government to regulate expression for the public good, he said, would mean that the First Amendment contemplated not a right but a privilege, a position he called “the grossest absurdity that ever was conceived by the human mind.” The press should be liable for “reparation” of individual reputation but essentially should be able to “do whatever it pleases to do, uncontrolled by any law” (Hay [1799] 1970, 34–41).

The Commission acknowledged that any “power capable of protecting freedom is also capable of infringing freedom” (115) and “government has its own peculiar form of temptation to manage ideas and images entering public debate” (116). But in the next passage the Commission declares that the remedy is for government to “set limits” upon itself when tempted (116), a self-restraint of which libertarians would be skeptical.

The Commission noted a “presumption against the use of legal action to curb press abuse” (123) but then questioned the exercise of freedom that does not serve the public interest, adding, Freedom to express has hitherto included freedom to refrain from expressing, for the press this liberty is no longer perfect” (124). The interest of the public has acquired the “stature of a right” (125, emphasis in original) and protection of the freedom of the issuer is no longer sufficient to protect automatically either the consumer or the community” (125).

Although the Commission emphasized self-regulation, it left the door open for considerable government intrusion. The press in the Commission’s view, had the primary responsibility to define and realize standards of social responsibility but the process should also “be systematically associated with corresponding efforts of community, consumers, and government” (127). Government, the Commission continued, may assist in making distribution more universal and equitable, removing handicaps for the free flow of ideas, reducing confusion and promoting the reality of public debate” (127) and providing new legal remedies for “the more patent abuses of the press” (which the Commission likened to clearing the highways of drunken drivers) (127–28). Finally, government should supplement the press’s commentary and news supply. The next sentence is telling of the Commission’s faith in government. “In so doing, it may present standards for private emulation” (128). The “new legal remedies” were to be implemented with the “precautions that the Commission had emphasized” at some unidentified other points in its report (127).

Although ringing endorsements of press freedom can be found elsewhere, when read in context, the nature of the press’s freedom is ultimately in serving the public, according to the Commission. The press has no moral right not to serve the public.
interest. The Commission attempted a philosophical distinction between moral rights and legal rights, with Chafee especially insisting that journalists might, for example, not be true to their consciences and might lie without forfeiting the legal right to speak (10, 122–23, McIntyre 1987, 145). Like its pronouncements on the inadvisability of government regulation, though, the Commission's attempted distinction between moral and legal rights is ambiguous at best if not contradicted outright elsewhere in the report. We may certainly wonder about the import for legal rights of pronouncements such as these: "It becomes an imperative question whether press performance can any longer be left to the unregulated initiative of the issuers," and "protection of the freedom of the issuer is no longer sufficient to protect automatically either the consumer or the community. The general policy of laissez faire in this field must be reconsidered" (125).

Thus, when the Commission wrote that the freedom of the press was "essential, the reader soon appreciates that the Commission is not talking about the same freedom that libertarians understand the First Amendment to guarantee: "The notion of rights, costless, unconditional, conferred by the Creator at birth, was a marvelous fighting principle against arbitrary governments and had its historical work to do," but that notion is now "invalid" without a concomitant "condition of duty," the Commission wrote (121).

The Commission cited with approval Hocking's book Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principles (1271), published under the auspices of the Commission. Hocking and Zechariah Chafee, vice chairman of the Commission and as close to a libertarian as the Commission had, were embroiled at one point in a dispute over whether the government ought to punish falsehoods. Chafee prevailed and the final report recommended only compulsory correction of errors. But Hocking's writing and neoliberal philosophy is otherwise sprinkled generously throughout the report. Whole passages are repeated in his own book.

Hocking, as has already been noted, emphasized the rights of communities rather than individuals: "Inseparable from the right of the press to be free has been the right of the people to have a free press," Hocking wrote: "But the public interest has advanced beyond that point, it is now the right of the people to have an adequate press" (emphasis in original). And of the two rights, it is the right of the public which today tends to take precedence in importance" (Hocking 1947, 169).

Hocking also assumed that government, in forwarding the public's right to know, would be benevolent. "The state is, in its nature, the greatest instrument for achieving the common purposes of the human community," he wrote (1947, pp. 188-89). He evinced little or none of the skepticism toward the state characteristic of libertarians. Like other neoliberals, Hocking seemed to think that state intervention could make good every lack of liberty and equality," as Jensen observed (1957, 169-70, 190-91).

But neoliberals might do well to adopt more of the libertarian distrust of government. As John Dewey wrote, even if we are obliged to abandon permanently the earlier belief that governmental action is by its own momentum hostile to free self-government, we are far from having refuted the evidence of history that officials who have political power will use it arbitrarily" (1939, 60).

Neoliberals, in focusing on the power of the press, seem to overlook the negative aspects of the power of government. Even if libertarian theory is "obsolete," as Peterson contended and those "who still speak of freedom of the press as a purely personal right are a diminishing breed, lonely and anachronistic" (FT 103), nevertheless libertarians' fundamental wariness of government should not be disregarded lightly. It was based on centuries of experience, and the framers' concern for the penchant of government to aggressively expand the scope of its influence has only been borne out in the years since 1791.

Indeed, we may wonder why the Commission was so anx...
putation technologies and interconnect with other systems) has rekindled a recurring debate. Are new information technologies a threat to the well-being of the political system or do they contribute to its proper functioning? A favorable early evaluation of new communication technologies can be found in the writings of Lewis Mumford (1934), who foresaw a world where individuals who were geographically distant from their leaders could maintain contact, technology would thus make government more responsive. Others predicted that the impact of technologies would be more authoritarian than democratic. George Orwell, whose fantasies of yesterday are well within the bounds of today’s realities, is probably the individual most widely known for having offered a different perspective. “The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously any sound Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it. He could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way to know whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged into any individual wire was guesswork. It was conceivable that they watched everybody all the time” (1949).

Despite some anxiety over the power of new communication technologies, most proponents seem to align their optimism alongside the central premise of the “invisible hand” notion of classical economics. Self-correcting market forces will remedy imbalances in the marketplace. The unresolved question is whether people, when adversely affected by some sociopolitical force, will automatically use information as “power” in the context envisioned by Bacon. There are examples that they will do so. Perhaps the most widely disseminated example is the 1991 beating of Rodney King by several police officers in Los Angeles, eventually touching off one of that city’s most serious riots. A private citizen used a new information technology (the portable video camera) not only to call public attention to a “common” unacceptable activity (official misuse of force) but also to suggest the opportunity and potential for ordinary citizens to use communication currency to influence governance.

New information technologies are becoming available at rapidly decreasing costs. Although the well-to-do, educated, and politically experienced traditionally have used various communication systems (e.g., mail, telegraph, telephone) to talk to their elected officials, the lowering of the ‘toll’ to travel along the information pathway is making the same interaction accessible to the poor, politically inexperienced, and (unfortunately, some would say) the uneducated. The question that remains, then, is less whether poor and politically inexperienced people will have access to communication channels but more whether and how they will use those channels.

We also need to turn our attention to the changes occurring in information industries and to explore whether in an economic marketplace free from government regulation those corporations who will distribute information as a “product” or commodity can be expected to promote the broader national interest, even if it may be less in their own economic interest.

Ironically, the very logic that should guarantee universal access to the information highway may be constructing roadblocks to the poor and undereducated. The breakup of AT&T in the 1980s, for instance, was meant to serve the public interest. But each of the new competing companies sees its own best interests in serving the relatively affluent, so that capital investment in new technologies like fiber optics tends to bypass poorer neighborhoods. What does this foreshadow for the state of the modern day democracy? After all, in a democracy, influence should not be a function of money, some citizens have little to spend, yet their rights need to be protected. The expressions “information rich” and “information poor” already have achieved lexical status among communications scholars.

Technologies do not invent or deploy themselves. Whatever the promise of new technologies in the abstract, a number of questions merit closer scrutiny. Who are the architects of the information highway? Who do they represent? What tactics do they use to convince policy makers that their views are best for the nation? Why has the number of information conglomerates
grown so rapidly in recent years? What is the impact of that growth? The dilemma that major stakeholders and architects of the information highway face in adopting the strategy of making access universal and affordable—consistent with the ideals of the telephone monopoly model—or of deploying advanced communication facilities only to the most sophisticated users and those who can pay the "market" price has broad implications for the modern democracy.

Perhaps new communications technologies will allow individuals to participate more actively in the marketplace of ideas. The older information technologies placed significant restrictions on who could compete. The traditional theoretical model defined communication as involving five discrete elements: the communicator, or sender of the message, the communicatee, or receiver of the message, the transmitting and receiving devices; the message itself, and the receiver's response (feedback) to the original message (Other models added varying degrees of sophistication to this general concept, including "noise," "perception," etc.). In general, the information media—and most of them until recently have been "mass" media—have emulated this five element construct. The newspaper produces a message, the subscriber reads it and, if he or she chooses, offers feedback, either through a letter to the editor or via a cancelled subscription. The scenario has remained generally constant with radio, television, magazines, and other mass media. But new technologies can enhance the potential, opportunities, and capacities for the general public to influence the content, delivery, form, and result of media communication. The end user citizen may evolve into a powerful producer who not only writes and edits the script but also shoots the film, stars in the movie, edits the film, creates the music, defines the audience, and acts as her or his own critic.

Such technologies would corrode the privileged status of communications professionals. The definition of communication and information on the eve of the twenty-first century rests with the speaker and the audience, not necessarily with the guild of information providers called journalists, editors, and photographers. The wealthy class called publishers, the influential class called "opinion leaders," or the media created class of icons called celebrities or newsmakers. The theoretical underpinnings of news and information as a professional product also are being tested, challenged, and overturned. New spaces are being added to the public sphere that redefine the "agenda" for news reporting enterprises. Even Bill Clinton and Ross Perot seized the opportunity during the 1992 presidential election to embrace and communicate via "new" information technologies, such as cable's MTV and Larry King's call-in program, neither of which symbolizes "traditional" professional journalism's values. The public, using new information technologies (e.g., databases, fax machines, telephones, electronic bulletin boards, desktop publishing, video cameras and recorders, compact discs, and public access channels on cable television) and existing systems (e.g., radio call-in, pseudoevents to obtain press coverage, and talk show TV) have increased their currency in the information landscape. (Although it still remains to be seen whether they'll be able to afford the toll to have access to the electronic information highway.)

All of this opens up new opportunities for old styles of politics—especially the formation of interest groups. The quantum leap for new information technologies is their enormous capacity and potential to empower the individual end user wherever she may be and whenever he wants to express an opinion or respond to something else in the marketplace of ideas. It is one thing for the mother of a drunk-driving victim to convene a meeting at her church, synagogue, or mosque and win friends and influence people to join her cause. It becomes both evolutionary and revolutionary, however, when she is able to log on to a personal computer communication network, search a database of individuals with an interest that may overlap with hers, compose and distribute a message to her audience at the precise time...
she chooses to do so, and not only receive and respond to feedback from others on the system but also participate simultaneously in another “public forum” with a different group of individuals concerning a different subject and also a third, and a fourth, and a fifth—indeed, an infinite number of marketplaces of ideas.

While we are tempted to shout “Yes!” and smile broadly about the wonders and awesome powers of newer information technologies, we still hear echoes of the question raised earlier—it is not so much whether people will have the technologies as whether they will use them. People have the vote; they do not use it.

Advertising as a Special Case

Many critics blame advertising for the quality of the major media in Western countries (Baker 1994). Advertising is seen as acting both an economic and a cultural force, creating economies of scale that drive media concentration, chilling criticism of big business, forcing media to emphasize both audiences that will buy and content that will put audiences in a buying mood. In each of these arguments, advertising is urging the media to be irresponsible.

Advertising did not come up for detailed discussion in Four Theories. But certainly it was included by implication in the dictum that one role of the press was to serve the economy. The fact that it is not discussed at length implies that it was a taken for granted aspect of “free” media (i.e., media construed under the libertarian theory). Likewise, Peterson implicates in his chapter on social responsibility theory that advertising is a force that must be kept in check, in much the same way as the profit-motive of media owners must be kept in check. Does advertising favor the libertarian theory and shun social responsibility? Or is it more complicated than that? We have already noted that responsibility did not necessarily contradict the profit-motive of media owners—in many regards, it was just good business sense.

What about advertising?

Advertisers might want to think of themselves as responsible, just as journalists do. But they certainly do not have the same responsibilities as journalists. No advertiser would shrink from an advocacy position—that’s the whole point of advertising.

“To explain responsibility to advertising people, the late advertising practitioner/gadfly Howard Gossage (1987, chap. 2) observed, “is like trying to convince an eight-year-old that sexual intercourse is more fun than a chocolate ice cream cone.”

Realistically, one assumes that the conventional wisdom of any period would support his fatalism. But why? Contemporary advertising practice, both forced and voluntary responsibility, most practitioners would contend, far exceeds that forced on or embraced by virtually any other facet of the media industries.

Indeed, dimensions of voluntary responsibility have been part of the advertising experience throughout this century. Its first significant presence occurred in the Progressive Era when, according to Quentin Schultz, Progressivism for (businessmen) became an ethos of professionalism, they estimated their self worth according to the degree to which their occupation displayed the typical characteristics of professionalism, notably ethical codes, licensing or certification requirements, and standardized instruction.” (1982, 17)

This ongoing concern with various degrees of professional responsibility can be noted in the history of one of advertising’s most prominent and influential trade organizations, the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA). Founded in 1917 with “the dreams of its founding members to unify a ragtag industry,” the AAAA celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1992 and, in its commemorative publication, highlighted many actions that could certainly be construed as embodiments of a philosophy of responsibility beyond that of at least the narrowest of the
self-interests of the practitioner entities. Examples (drawn from "The Early Years," Agency, Spring 1992, 26–33) include

- 1917—The Division of Advertising of the Committee of Public Information serves to coordinate World War I campaigns for the Army, Navy, Victory Loans, Victory Bonds, the National War Savings Committee, and the Red Cross. Beyond their explicit goals of persuasion and action on behalf of the war effort, these efforts also, according to the AAAA’s own perception, “afforded the newly unified advertising industry a chance to demonstrate the potency of a compelling message, well told.”

- 1924—The Standards of Practice for Advertising Agencies is developed, including not only proposed standards of advertising business practices but also a declaration that member agencies should “refrain from preparing or handling any advertising of an untruthful, indecent, or objectionable nature.”

- 1941—With the aid of the Association of National Advertisers, the War Advertising Council is established, dealing with many of the same issues and functions as its World War I counterpart.

- 1946—The Association votes to continue the financial underwriting of what had become the postwar Advertising Council, still regarded as advertising’s most conspicuous presence of social responsibility with more than $1 billion of advertising time and space donated annually (This group recently started an effort to challenge racism in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.)

- 1947—The "Monthly Exchange of Opinion on Objectionable Advertising" is created.

- 1960—The Association responds to the television era with a "Special Interpretation of the AAAA Copy Code with Respect to TV Commercials.

- 1962—A new AAAA "Creative Code" is developed and subsequently endorsed by many other advertising and media organizations.

- 1966—Plans are developed for the creation of the Advertising Educational Foundation, which, among other less self-interested activities, seeks to educate the government, the academy, and the media about the virtues of advertising in the economy and society.

- 1970—The organization issues Political Campaign Advertising and Advertising Agencies in an attempt to deal with the many abuses of the increasing use of television in political campaigns. (The bestselling book The Selling of the President confirms the increasingly obvious excesses.)

- 1971—AAAAs joins other industry groups in establishing the National Advertising Review Board apparatus with out qualification the business’s most successful self regulatory effort (more than 2,800 cases have been handled to date).

- 1973—A Minority Internship Program is established.

- 1974—AAAAs adopts revised guidelines for the increasingly prevalent form of comparative advertising.

- 1983—With the Association of National Advertisers, AAAA begins to monitor the television networks to determine if the standards to control advertising "clutter" are being honored.

- 1986—The Association initiates the "Media-Advertising Partnership for a Drug Free America," eventually securing $1.5 billion in donated advertising time and space over a three year period. (A $25 million effort to combat functional illiteracy was launched during the same period.)

In addition to the activities of this prominent trade organization, many other policing mechanisms exist. A special 1991 report of Congressional Quarterly Researcher observed "Print ads are typically reviewed by legal departments of agencies and advertisers, and often by technical and scientific staffs. Broadcast
networks review storyboards of TV ads before they are produced [and] the editors, owners and publishers of broadcast and print media that carry ads constitute a further set of [voluntary] controls' (Clark 1991, 666). Finally, in the course of normal daily practice myriad advertisers, agencies, media, and individual practitioners involve themselves in varied acts of pro bono work or simple volunteerism (Clark 1991, 659).

Why, then, with this plethora of self imposed (albeit often clearly self interested) activities and advertising's claim to be 'the most regulated industry' from federal, state, and local governments, do advertisers bemoan their low public reputation?

In part, of course, advertising, as other institutions, lives within that 'master institution' of common sense. And, apparently beyond argument, our contemporary common sense is faced with heavy doses of unfocused cynicism, reflected in idle examples such as polling results showing a marked decline of those regarding 'most people as honest,' and a *Time* cover story asserting 'Lying (Everybody's Doing It, Honest)' From this perspective, advertising shares the zeitgeist, and an examination of advertising history suggests that it may be more prone to critical scrutiny during times of particular economic and/or philosophical upheaval (e.g., the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, the mid sixties to the mid seventies). But Gossage's 'difficulty in explaining responsibility to advertising people' clearly transcends chronology. Witness the advertising pioneer Bruce Barton's 1927 comment 'If advertising persuades some men to live beyond their means, so does matrimony. If advertising speaks to a thousand in order to influence one, so does the church. If advertising is often garish and redundant, so is the United States Senate. We are young and law and medicine and theology are old' (Fox 1985, 108)—but much older now.

In part, advertising's seemingly endless travails in the realms of responsibility may be explained by the very environments within which it functions, as well as its inherent dynamics. For as William Less, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally observe 'Because it stands at the intersection of industry [marketing practices], communications [the mass media], and group interactions [stereotyping], advertising can come under attack from anyone who is upset about any feature of these three domains' (1986, chap 12). Thus, the ante for advertising to conduct itself responsibly is raised simply because of where it originates (in marketing practices), how it is delivered (through the mass media), and who it represents in its verbal and nonverbal communications (groups and the inevitable stereotyping common to mass communications).

As for its inherent dynamics, these factors seem to have particular explanatory power.

- Operating from comfortable assumptions about the workings of the market system, advertisers may assume they're performing responsibly while pursuing clearly self interested ends. By way of example, Congress passed a landmark law in 1990 requiring television stations to prove they were adequately serving the educational and informational needs of young viewers or risk losing their licenses (Waters 1992, 88–89). Two years later a study by a coalition of consumer groups concluded that the TV industry has devised a conscious strategy of redefining virtually all entertainment programs (e.g., *Bucky O'Hare Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers, Yo, Yogi*) for children as educational and informational." Yet, arguing that the children watch what they want to watch, the head of children's programming at CBS noted, 'If broccoli is the only thing on a kid's plate, that doesn't mean he's going to eat it," and "Who's to say what's appropriate for our young? How can you have rules about something that subjective? And with all respect to Peggy Charren, who elected her to represent the values of this nation's parents?" (Waters 1992).

We believe there is a clear message here and throughout countless other examples of advertising practice that are considered 'irresponsible' by some yet are regarded as the height of sensitivity by practitioners. That message is this: The advertising business frequently operates on essentially libertarian assumptions, loosely based on a presumed harmony of self interests as man...
spected through the mechanisms of the relatively unregulated market system. Thus, in the example cited, the advertising parties consider their offering of popular children’s programming an appropriate response to market mechanisms, with “responsibility” operationally defined as proof of market acceptance—in other words, the popular programming attracts (read “satisfies”) a larger number of children than more educational fare.

* The very nature of the advertising message as a biased form of communication clearly raises the issue as to what constitutes “responsible” market information. We must,” states the president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, “do a better job of educating the public and Congress of the value of professional communications [i.e., ads] in the healthcare delivery process.” He was responding in part to a widely publicized 1990 study that concluded that 92 percent of 109 page ads printed in ten major medical journals failed to meet at least one rule of the Food and Drug Administration’s regulations (O’Toole 1992, 24, Danzign 1992, 46).

Ads, by their nature, are selective communication forms and, as such, lend themselves to often disparate interpretations of their proper role. Consider, for example, three prominent and disparate positions: (1) Ads as communication forms are responsible as they are. We recognize their biases and act accordingly. In addition, we are routinely exposed to a multiplicity of views in a rough approximation of a marketplace of ideas. (2) As easily accessible and potentially influential forms of communication, ads must be required to be more responsible (e.g., as with cigarette warnings) so that consumer-citizens are better informed about their potential choices. (3) The communications marketplace is inadequate. Let ads speak with their biased messages but media should provide additional voices of information/persuasion so that the sovereign individual is free to make an informed choice from all available information.

Clearly, views one and three paint a far more flattering picture of the individual as decision maker than the easily duped—and not easily saved—model of point two. The dimensions of responsibility then, seem heavily dependent on the perceptions in play.

* Assignment of responsibility depends in large part on whether one agrees or disagrees with the advertisers intent. Is it, for example, responsible for a company to advertise a product that is harmful even when used as intended? Such is the case with cigarette rettes, a product class with an annual advertising and promotion budget in excess of $2 billion. Yet advertisers—in their unabashed self-interests—also encourage us to eat healthier foods, take better care of our bodies, and save our money. Moreover, advertisers—with no clear commercial outcome—also ask us to be more tolerant, more charitable, less abusive, and more activist in a host of humanitarian causes.

These are largely micro-concerns. Yet some hold advertising responsible for larger agendas. Advertising, suggests the AAAA in a series of industry promoting messages, is nothing less than “an other word for freedom of choice.” But, critics argue, there are far less attractive lessons being taught as well: impatience, selfishness, superficiality. At the level of day to day commercial discourse, or the assumed implicit agenda so relentlessly taught and reinforced in virtually all advertising, there are great difficulties in identifying, much less proscribing, responsible activities.

* Advertising can be considered responsible or irresponsible depending in part on whether it seeks us or we seek it, and with what message. There are, of course, advertising forms that are commonly sought by interested parties (e.g., the classifieds, cata logues, directory, electronic shopping networks, grocery store ads, etc.). Yet by far the majority of the advertising we encounter is inadvertent—it seeks us rather than vice versa. Not surprisingly, this raises a host of issues dealing with responsibility in such areas as timing, privacy, and frequency, to mention only the most obvious.

The Seagram Company has announced that it will place advertisements only in those portions of seven magazines that reach
drinkers or those likely to drink their brands” (Levin 1992). Arguably, then, ads closely aligned with audience interests are more likely to be welcomed than, say, the relatively intrusive—and often poorly matched in terms of product and audience—messages on television or radio. Indeed, it could be hypothesized that the closer the fit between potential consumer interests and the presence of the product or service advertised, the more likely the advertising messages are to be considered appropriate or responsible. Note also that there is no conscious pulling of the punches on the part of the advertiser here—merely an attempt to communicate as effectively as possible.

To some, of course, the height of advertising irresponsibility occurs when a message is delivered in what is perceived as the wrong environment—for example, a feminine hygiene product advertised on television when a mixed audience is present or, for some, any advertising before a motion picture, in a school room, or blocking a particularly scenic view along a highway.

There is an old advertising slogan—“The public is a parade, not a mass meeting”—which suggests the need to repeat a particular message until the desired result is achieved. This particular issue of responsibility beyond narrow self-interest is, predictably, accentuated with the broadcast media, where advertising “clutter” is an issue of lost efficiency for advertisers and irritation for the audience.

It is clear to all that advertisers are seeking consumers more relentlessly than ever before through the mass media as well as other less traditional media forms. To the extent that the match of moment, subject, and interest is not apt, there will certainly be charges of irresponsible acts even though advertisers may also find it in their best interests to accomplish the tight fit. As media forms become more specialized—with ensuing customized content—that ideal may be approached, but advertising’s sheer presence throughout our waking environment will certainly continue to be a vexing issue of what constitutes “proper” responsibility.

Social Responsibility Theory

1. The contention that advertising changes the nature of media coverage. Sporting events are now routinely scheduled and conducted not for the convenience of athletes or spectators but in compliance with the accepted “rules of the game” to assure the most attractive audience size and composition for advertisers. Special sections on gardening, recreation, home energy consumption, and so on are put together by magazines and newspapers not primarily for the edification of readers but as vehicles for collecting specialized consumers for specialized advertisers. Again, the issues of responsibility loom when the media purveyors point to sizable audiences as proof of interest, if not acceptance.

2. The contention that the presence or anticipation of advertising can alter media content. When was the last time, a media critic observed, that you saw a serious investigative piece on the activities of used car dealers in your community? The implication, of course, is that the presence—or promise—of heavy advertising schedules can compromise journalistic zeal. Several studies, for example, have revealed that magazines become increasingly reluctant to cover smoking risks as their revenue from cigarette ads rises” (Collins 1992, 41). Or, as Gloria Steinem
celebrated in the first issue of the advertising free Ms. Goodbye to cigarette ads where poems should be. Goodbye to celebrity covers and too little space. Goodbye to cleaning up language so that Ms. advertisers won’t be boycotted by the Moral Majority. In fact, goodbye to the Moral Majority.” (Braden 1992)

The contention that the promise of advertising can affect the type of media available to us. Home Box Office (HBO) is fond of boasting that it is able to produce films on subjects that commercial networks avoid simply because of expected advertiser indifference if not hostility. Are we not far more likely to be able to imagine an advertiser supported magazine with a name (and implied target audience) like Self-Indulgent Jogger than Old and Poor? Advertising carrying media, then, are quite likely to be “market” sensitive.

Now, this may or may not produce a socially responsive media landscape, depending on the perception applied. The media, again, can use market mechanisms for proxies of satisfaction and assumed “responsibility,” at least to the segments so favored. Television, it has been observed, reflects demography far more than democracy, yet almost inevitably those overindulged by the media are also those in the greatest positions of influence, power, and success in their personal and professional lives and are hence likely to at least feel comfortable with media status.

Yet critics contend that if we rely predominantly on naked market forces to populate and perpetuate our media environment we are inevitably producing a pecking order of media haves and have-nots dominated by the power of advertising revenues. From this perspective, then, it is virtually impossible for advertisers to be considered to be acting responsibly toward needs beyond their own, as it is their actual or promised revenues, expected or anticipated in the course of what has become accepted as conventional wisdom in media commerce, that are providing the lure to the media vehicles that, to the critics, lead to high irresponsibility.

While socially responsible advertising seems like an oxymoron to some, it is a presumed fact of everyday commercial life to many of its practitioners and apologists. Beyond even matters of enlightened self-interest, the advertising business can point to specific practices—some institutionalized and many others ad hoc—that clearly meet any reasonable definition of social responsibility. Moreover, in their daily commercial practices, many advertising practitioners implicitly assume their activities are “responsible” because they are allegedly responsive—to the yeasayers’ behavior of potential consumers of products and services. And by its very nature as an explicit form of mediated persuasion (“paid propaganda,” as Gossage referred to it), advertising will inevitably be considered socially irresponsible depending upon the mix of time, place, subject matter, and intent in a given context.

However irresponsible critics may accuse advertising of being, there is little chance of it disappearing anytime soon. Daniel Boorstin has called advertising “the classic rhetoric of democracy” (1974, 11–12). As such, it seems likely to continue to be as zestful, frustrating, and maddeningly complex as the idea system that spawned, nurtured—and still challenges—it.

Conclusion

The case of advertising highlights the complexity of the concept of socially responsible media. Responsible behavior is the ethical requirement of individuals working within specific sectors of the communications environment, and different occupations may have different standards of responsibility or professionalism. But responsible behavior on the microlevel can exist within a laissez faire system—in other words, under the libertarian theory in the terms used by Four Theories. What about the macrolevel?
It seems an open question whether social responsibility theory makes demands on the macrolevel. Certainly the theory expects some kind of stewardship of media resources on behalf of the public, certainly it expects the media to be educators. But at the same time it avoids detailing structural changes (including government regulation) that would allow performance of these functions.

Thus, we continue to argue about ourselves about the promises and dangers of social responsibility theory. These arguments will continue because of the vagueness that necessarily adheres to a notion used by so many people for so many reasons. But even if we restrict ourselves to a single historical document—in this case, the Hutchins Commission report—it seems that we will fail to come to agreement. This is because the Hutchins Commission tried to make a house big enough for all to fit in. In fact, social responsibility theory seems to contain within it several different theories. We can identify at least three.

First, there is a conservative model. This calls for limited adjustments—"Let's just all try a little harder to be fair"—to forestall more radical proposals. Such a call for socially responsible media is little different from the enlightened libertarianism that characterizes mainstream advertising practices. It expects media to remain primarily market- and profit driven.

A second, moderate model calls for the profit motive to be severely curtailed but only in the presentation of news and opinion. The moderate position wants a benevolent elite of expert professional journalists to be insulated from the crasser concerns of media owners and thus be free to serve a public that is, of course, also crass but not as canny as the wealthy and powerful. Thus, a protected community of professionals will allow a larger competitive, individualistic society to operate with a modicum of fairness.

A third, radical model calls for transformation of the greater society itself. Instead of responsible media serving an essential-

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ly individualistic, competitive public, they should be engaged in supporting and creating a communitarian public. Indeed, truly responsible media can exist only in the context of real communities, communities conceived of as not just based on geographical proximity or superficial interactions among individuals but as the shared creation of a common life, culture, or identity (Christians, Ferre, and Fackler 1993).

These three models meet the standards and requirements of social responsibility theory. While they seem only marginally compatible with each other, they still share some characteristics, especially on the level of policy. They all hope for change to come from moral behavior rather than government action. They all worry at least a little about the ability of the 'free market' to resolve social conflict. And they all decline to demand structural change in media industries—even though the communitarians come close. This is a crucial area where Marxism differs, as the next chapter relates.

Notes

1. Writing as a historical sociologist, Orlando Patterson demonstrates that Western freedom is a tripartite value—a 'chorded triad' with three constituent elements: personal, sovereign, and civic freedoms—living in an often fragile unity (1991, 5). He recognizes the power of negative, personal freedom—that is the valorization of personal liberty—as 'the core value of Western culture throughout its history' (1991, 402), but he finds the binary model of political philosophers such as Isaiah Berlin overworked—a nonstartor sociologically (5). As summarized here, Berlin did not develop a purely negative meaning (Patterson 1991, 3) but integrated the two dimensions into a workable unit and, in any case, represented analytically a distinction used by Hocking and others during the mid-twentieth century. In terms of Patterson's sociohistorical typology, Hocking provides an alternative to classical liberal versions of personal freedom by formulating a civic con
ception of freedom as the foundation of social responsibility theory. In this way, Hocking aids in the struggle against what Patterson calls ‘the ongoing contradictions in civic freedom’ (404–5).

2 Liberalism considered the established government its greatest enemy (FT 56).

3 The Commission noted that the ‘agencies of mass communication are an educational instrument, perhaps the most powerful there is’ in presenting and attaining social goals (28). The Commission then devoted a substantial portion of its report to its perception of those agencies’ inaccuracies, biases, inaccessibility to the impoverished, capitalistic corruption, and the agencies penchant for the sensational, trivial, novel, and the scoop in attempting to appeal to the largest possible audience (52–68).

4 The theme of Agnew’s speech was the power of the media, a power equal to that of local, state, and Federal governments all combined ‘yet one that the American people would rightly not tolerate in Government’. He mentions the power of the broadcast media thirteen times in his speech, concluding that it is time such power was ‘questioned in the hands of a small and unelected elite’. He had demurely suggested earlier, however, that it was not his place to suggest answers to the problem, and he was not asking for Government censorship or any other kind of censorship.

5 She is head of the watchdog group Action for Children’s Television.