

Evaluating the Role and Traditions of British Media During the COVID-19 Crisis

Describe the news media in your country of choice. Consider the history and traditions of journalism in that country, and which theory or theories best characterise its function in that society. Explain and justify your decision about why you think it falls under that theory. You may need to look at other more detailed theories beyond *Four Theories of the Press*.

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Introduction

The liberal British media is not entirely free. Britain has maintained a free press for two hundred years and functioned as a fourth estate independent of government control (SIEBERT et al., 1963). However, as the government increases monitoring and control of the media, Britain's press freedom ranking is falling (Ackerley, 2023). Therefore, the British media reflects typical libertarian, social responsibility and authoritarian theories. This essay holds that the British media mainly conforms to the first two news theories and embodies some authoritarian characteristics. It also uses three theories to analyze how British traditional media embodies three opposing theories during the Covid-19 period and how consistent the theory is with the British press.

The Libertarian Theory

The libertarian theory occupies the core position in the British media. It has a long history, reflecting the characteristics of the British media, such as freedom and independence from and supervision of the government. In 1644, John Milton published *Areopagitica* arguing against censorship and stressing the importance of freedom of speech (SIEBERT et al., 1963). "It was for its time a powerful argument against authoritarian controls (SIEBERT et al., 1963, p. 44)." 1688, the Glorious Revolution transformed England from a monarchy to a democracy (SIEBERT et al., 1963). The redistribution of state power provides an essential political foundation and environment for the freedom of journalism (SIEBERT et al., 1963). The establishment of the Bill of Rights 1689 and the reform of the Libel Law in 1972 provided legal protection for the

freedom of the press in England (SIEBERT et al., 1963). Britain has used newspapers to shape its historical role in shaping national identity, demonstrating the country's progress and freedom and the press's active defence of democracy (Ackerley, 2023). The freedom and independence of British journalism are outstanding in the world.

However, libertarian theory is not entirely consistent with the British media and media freedom is being hampered. The two world wars witnessed the era of the press baron, the contraction of news and the phenomenon of elite control of news (Ackerley, 2023).

A few dominant media outlets limit the content and scope of news presented to the public (Ackerley, 2023). This phenomenon has undermined the objectivity and independence of news reporting and has involved the news media in a melee between government control and commercial interests (Ackerley, 2023). Compared to the World War, the British media triggered a similar war operation during Covid-19, the authority of the British media was threatened by the government, the freedom of the press was affected, and citizens' trust in the media suffered. In May 2020, when the British government required everyone to stay at home, Dominic Cummings, a senior adviser to the British Prime Minister, still went out with his symptomatic wife, violating the lockdown regulations (RSF, 2020). In the face of media reports, government officials said people should not trust all news content (RSF, 2020). Rebecca Vincent of RSF noted the government's actions had a negative impact on the relationship between the public and the media and would erode the free press environment in Britain (RSF, 2020).

In addition, the UK government's secrecy over information and data during Covid-19

is also undermining the freedom and independence of the news media and hindering media oversight of the government. The government suppressed the announcement of Exercise Cygnus, citing fear among the public (Newton, 2020). The government's lack of transparency about SAGE member information and expert opinions has also led to public doubts about the science of the government's plans (Newton, 2020). These actions limit the media's ability and freedom to report facts and impede the public's access to practical information.

The Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory plays a vital role in Britain. In 1948, the Hutchins Commission report proposed media social responsibility, which profoundly impacted the United Kingdom (Brooks, 1947). The report points out that the media is responsible for providing "truthful, comprehensive and intelligent (Brooks, 1947, p. 20)" information to society and shoulder the responsibility of social education. As a media organization with an important position and profound influence in Britain and the world (Mills, 2020), BBC embodies a close connection with the social responsibility theory. For example, in the 1930s, the BBC's conversational public discourse style advocated everyone's participation and interaction, widely disseminated easy-to-understand and adequate information for people and played an essential role in conveying democracy (Curran, 2002). The BBC's aggressive reporting style on politics and the royal family shows the independence of the media and plays an essential role in the public supervision of the government (Curran, 2002). Rational and objective news content also shapes the BBC's professional and authoritative image among the public (Curran, 2002).

During the pandemic, citizens still rely on and trust the BBC. Cardiff University surveyed 200 news audiences and found that people's trust in the BBC exceeded 80%, ranking first among all broadcasters (Alnahed, 2021). In times of crisis, citizens are more likely to get critical and trustworthy information from the BBC than from governments and politicians (Newton, 2020).

However, the social responsibility theory faces challenges in Britain. Even as a model of practising social responsibility theory, the BBC cannot maintain theoretical principles and implement necessary media responsibilities (Mills, 2020). Some British media used exaggerated negative emotional words and war-related metaphors when reporting on the pandemic in China (Chaiuk & Dunaievska, 2020). The emotional exaggeration of news is divorced from factual basis, causing social panic and preventing the public from judging the accurate information. It makes an anxious public feel disappointed with the media and creates a crisis of trust. At the end of May 2020, people's trust in news organizations was less than 50%, a drop of 10% in two months (Fletcher et al., 2020). In addition, how the government communicates with the public affects the British media in fulfilling media responsibilities and developing citizens' trust. During COVID-19, the UK government announced inaccurate death tolls and contradicted data from other reliable sources (Newton, 2020). Policies or notices issued by the government are inconsistent with the implementation facts, such as uncertain decisions on closing or opening public places and pandemic prevention rules on wearing masks that confuse citizens (Newton, 2020). These behaviours mislead the

media and the public, force the media to invest more resources to verify facts, cause false news to threaten society, and hinder the media from disseminating epidemic prevention measures and knowledge to society.

The Authoritarian Theory

Although the British media sets examples in libertarian and social responsibility theories, it still shows the colour of authoritarian theory. While the BBC is responsible for providing citizens with factual information, accountability, and government oversight, it has primarily followed the government line during Covid-19 (Alnahed, 2021). Some interviewees suggested that the BBC partnered with the government rather than monitoring and questioning it (Alnahed, 2021). In a survey of factors affecting reporting during the pandemic, BBC journalists ranked following government guidance second, with 45% saying reporting content was tightly controlled by the government (Alnahed, 2021). These results suggest that the government restricts press freedom during COVID-19, heavily censors news content, and the media supports and delivers the government's information.

However, the authoritarian theory does not fully apply to the British press. The authoritarian theory is consistent with the British government's restrictive strategies and the media's obedience in a specific historical period or event. Britain's liberal history, tradition, legal safeguards, and regulatory model are inconsistent with authoritarian theory. Even though the British media faces the problem of shrinking news and

centralizing rights, the press still supports self-regulation (Ackerley, 2023). It seeks a more free and democratic media environment (Ackerley, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, British media represents libertarianism and social responsibility theory and reflects authoritarian theoretical tendencies. Britain's historical tradition firmly advocates press freedom and democracy, but during the pandemic, the government's crackdown on the media's authoritative image, cover-up and hypocrisy have adversely affected press freedom. The BBC, which has played an active role in fulfilling its social responsibilities, also faces the threat of violating journalistic principles and fake news during the pandemic. Moreover, the BBC cannot avoid cooperating with the government and becoming a propaganda tool and channel of the government. Although none of the three theories can be fully applied to the British media, the libertarian theory and the social responsibility theory still reflect the British press's central pursuit and development goals.

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