That this Handbook calls for two large volumes and more than four dozen essays illustrates the dramatic pace of developing media theory in recent years. Such a reference work would have been impossible a decade or two ago when serious media theoretical research was just getting off the ground and we had far more questions than potential answers. Fortner and Fackler and their impressive array of contributors provide an invaluable intellectual anthology of what we now know, topics which are still only partially understood, and aspects where much remains to be done. The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory presents a comprehensive series of original essays that focus on all aspects of current and classic theories and practices relating to media and mass communication. While tracing the development of hundreds of media theories or their variants over the past century, this two-volume collection delves deeply into the most prominent and influential theories while providing enlightening case studies of their application in various regional and national contexts. Both empirically based theories and those developing from critical and normative perspectives are included, and international authorship ensures a global perspective of theoretical development. A wide range of topics is explored, including classical theories of media and the press, social construction and control, feminist media theory, globalization and cultural identity, theories of social media and new technologies, future directions in media theory, and many more. Authoritative and comprehensive, The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory sets a new standard in its compilation of the evolution and current state of our knowledge of theories in mass communication.
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About the Editors

Robert S. Fortner is Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Bulgaria. He is the author or editor of seven books and almost two dozen essays.

P. Mark Fackler is Professor of Communication at Calvin College, USA. He has written extensively on topics relating to communication and journalism ethics.

Chris Sterling, George Washington University

“Like Rodgers and Hammerstein or Lerner and Loewe, Robert Fortner and Mark Fackler are becoming the gourmet indispensable team who provide excellent inspiration for our field. Like Christians and Wilkins, they have set the bar with a handbook on international media ethics. Now they are raising that bar with The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory, which assembles a who’s who of leading theorists and media studies thinkers worldwide. Far more than an introduction to media theory, this double volume is the most current and comprehensive overview and analysis of the field. … MUST reading.”

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Daniel A. Berkowitz is Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication and associate dean in the Graduate College at the University of Iowa. His research includes social and cultural approaches to the study of news and news production, with an emphasis on mythical narrative and collective memory. He has published in journals such as *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Journalism Studies, Memory Studies*, and the *International Communication Gazette*. He has also published two edited volumes, *Social Meanings of News* and *Cultural Meanings of News*.

Amy Bleakley is a senior research scientist in the Health Communication Group at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on investigating media effects on health risk behaviors and on using theory to create evidence-based health interventions.

Brett A. Borton is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of South Carolina, Beaufort. A former print journalist and integrated communications specialist, his research interests are in sustainability of journalism, communication and culture, and media law.

Catherine Cassara is Associate Professor of Journalism, Bowling Green State University, and the author of articles and book chapters on international news coverage and human rights in American newspapers, media use, protest, and the impact of Al Jazeera in Tunisia. She worked for six years with colleagues at universities in Tunisia and Algeria.

Guo-Ming Chen is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Rhode Island. His research interests are in intercultural/organizational/global communication. Chen has published numerous articles and books. Those books
Notes on Contributors

include *Foundations of Intercultural Communication; Communication and Global Society, Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution; and Theories and Principles of Chinese Communication.*

**Clifford G. Christians** is Research Professor of Communications, Professor of Journalism, and Professor of Media Studies Emeritus, University of Illinois-Urbana. He co-authored *Normative Theories of the Media* (2009), and is editor (with Kaarle Nordenstreng) of *Communication Theories in a Multicultural World* (forthcoming).

**Yoel Cohen** is Associate Professor, School of Communication, Ariel University, Israel. His research interests include media and religion in Israel and in Judaism; religion and news; foreign news reporting; defence and the media. His book publications include *God, Jews & the Media: Religion & Israel's Media* (2012); *Whistleblowers and the Bomb: Vanunu, Israel and Nuclear Secrecy* (2005); *The Whistleblower of Dimona: Vanunu, Israel & the Bomb* (2003); *Media Diplomacy: The Foreign Office in the Mass Communications Age* (1986). His research has appeared in the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, Gazette, the Journal of Media & Religion, Israel Affairs, the Review of International Affairs*, and the *Encyclopaedia of Religion, Communication & Media*. He was Israel Media editor of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

**Jeffrey Crouch** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the American University in Washington, DC. He is the author of *The Presidential Pardon Power* (2009).

**Kevin Cummings** is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Mercer University and is an affiliated faculty member in the Department of Women and Gender Studies. His research examines the rhetoric surrounding domestic terrorism. More recently, his work has explored the figure of the terrorist and the figure of the citizen.

**Xiaodong Dai** is Associate Professor of Foreign Languages at Shanghai Normal University, China. His major research interests are cultural identity, identity negotiation, and intercultural communication theory. Dai has published numerous articles. His most recent books are *Identity and Intercultural Communication: Theoretical and Contextual Construction and Intercultural Communication Theories*.

**Norman K. Denzin** is Distinguished Professor of Communications, College of Communications Scholar, and Research Professor of Communications, Sociology, and Humanities at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. One of the world’s foremost authorities on qualitative research and cultural criticism, Denzin is the author or editor of more than two dozen books, including *The Qualitative Manifesto; Qualitative Inquiry Under Fire; Searching for Yellowstone; Reading Race, Interpretive*
Ethnography, The Cinematic Society, The Voyeur’s Gaze; and The Alcoholic Self. He is former editor of The Sociological Quarterly, co-editor (with Yvonna S. Lincoln) of four editions of the landmark Handbook of Qualitative Research, co-editor (with Michael D. Giardina) of five plenary volumes from the annual Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, co-editor (with Lincoln) of the methods journal Qualitative Inquiry, founding editor of Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies and International Review of Qualitative Research, and editor of three book series.

Wimal Dissanayake teaches at the Academy for Creative Media, University of Hawai’i and is a Senior Fellow at the East–West Center Hawai’i. He was formerly director of international cultural studies at the East West Center. Dissanayake is the author and editor of a large number of books on cinema and culture published by prestigious presses. He is the founding editor of the East–West Film Journal.

P. Mark Fackler is Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. He holds a PhD from the University of Illinois. His recent books include Ethics and Evil in the Public Sphere (edited with his present co-editor, Robert Fortner) and Ethics for Public Communication (co-edited with Clifford Christians and John Ferre). He teaches and does media research in East Africa.

Robert S. Fortner is Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Bulgaria. His research interests include media theory, international communication, media ethics, philosophy of technology, media cultural history, and political economy of the media. He has written and edited nine books and published essays in several others, along with publications in communication and media journals. He has conducted field research in twenty-two countries examining the application of new technologies and the credibility of the media, mostly in the developing world. His last work was a co-edited (with P. Mark Fackler) Blackwell International Handbook of Journalism and Mass Communication Ethics.

Ana Cristina Correia Gil teaches Portuguese culture, culture and identity, journalism, and media and mass culture at the University of the Azores. She is currently the director of the mass media communication and culture degree. Her research interests are identity issues and their relation to theory of culture, national culture and mass culture. She frequently participates in conferences and she is the coordinator of the newspaper (S)Em Rede, produced by students and teachers of the mass media and culture degree and published in Açorianos Orientais, Portugal’s most ancient newspaper. In Açorianos Orientais she publishes a weekly opinion column.

Ellen W. Gorsevski researches contemporary peacebuilding rhetoric (persuasive advocacy) in social and environmental justice movements. Her recent articles

**Cynthia Gottshall** is the Davenport Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Mercer University and is an affiliated faculty member in the Department of Women and Gender Studies. Her teaching and research interests are in representations of sex, gender, and sexuality in the American media.

**Shelton A. Gunaratne** is Professor of Mass Communications Emeritus at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He earned a doctorate from the University of Minnesota in 1972. Thereafter he taught journalism for 35 years in Malaysia, Australia, and the United States. He started his career as a journalist in Sri Lanka (1962–1967). After retirement he published an autobiographic trilogy in 2012, one titled *Village Life in the Forties: Memories of a Lankan Expatriate*, the other two titled *From Village Boy to Global Citizen*. The first bears the subtitle *The Life Journey of a Journalist*; the second and third, *The Travels of a Journalist*.

**Lei Guo**, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, has, together with Maxwell McCombs, initiated a new line of research, explicating the third level of agenda setting.

**Kai Hafez** is Professor of International and Comparative Media and Communication Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany. He was a senior associate fellow at the University of Oxford and a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo. Hafez is on the editorial boards of several academic journals, such as the *Journal of International Communication* and the *Global Media Journal and Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. One of his books is *The Myth of Media Globlization* (2007).

**Cees J. Hamelink** is Emeritus Professor of International Communication at the University of Amsterdam and Professor of Human Rights and Public Health at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He is editor-in-chief of the *International Communication Gazette* and honorary president of the International Association for Media and Communication Research. He published 18 books on human rights, culture, and technology.

**Jarice Hanson** is Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research focuses on the social impact of digital technologies and telecommunications policy. Author and editor of over 25 books, she is currently developing a research project on creative economy and information literacy.
Notes on Contributors

Kathleen Hall Jamieson is Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and director of its Annenberg Public Policy Center. Her work focuses on understanding the structure and effects of messages.

Patrick Jamieson directs the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Coding of Health and Media Project, a cross-time content analysis of filmic, televised, and Internet portrayal of risk behaviors including violence, tobacco, suicide and gun use. His interests also include designing and analyzing theoretically informed survey research on adolescent risk behavior.

Wenshan Jia is Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Chapman University, California and Guest Professor, School of Journalism, Renmin University, China. He is a prolific author on intercultural communication, Chinese communication, and global communication. He is the recipient of an Early Career Award for his significant contributions to intercultural relations, granted biannually by the International Academy for Intercultural Research; and of a Wang-Fradkin Endowed Professorship, the highest research award granted to a faculty member with a distinguished research record by Chapman University. Jia is consulting editor of the International Journal for Intercultural Relations and serves on the editorial board of the Asian Journal of Communication.

Igor E. Klyukanov is Professor of Communication at Eastern Washington University, Washington. His works have been published in the USA, Russia, England, Spain, Costa Rica, Serbia, Bulgaria, India, and Morocco. He is the founding editor of the Russian Journal of Communication.

Shanti Kumar is Associate Professor in the Department of Radio–TV–Film at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television (2006), and co-editor of Planet TV: A Global Television Reader (2003). He has also authored chapters in multi-contributor volumes and articles in journals such as Bioscope, Popular Communication, Television and New Media, Jump Cut, South Asian Popular Culture, The Quarterly Review of Film and Video, and South Asian History and Culture. His research and teaching interests include global media studies, cultural studies, Indian cinema and television, and postcolonial theory and criticism.

Mingsheng Li is Senior Lecturer at the College of Business, Massey University, New Zealand. He was awarded a doctoral degree in education from La Trobe University, Australia, in 1999. His research interests include intercultural communication, media studies, and international education.
Zheng Li is a PhD researcher in the Department of Political Science at Leiden University. She received a MSc in media and communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her current research focuses on Chinese media and politics. Her study tries to examine the social and political impact of television mediation programs.

Carolyn A. Lin researches the content, uses, and effects of digital media, international communication, advertising, social marketing, and health communication. She is the founder of the Communication Technology Division at the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication and a recipient of a University Distinguished Research Faculty Award.

Hailong Liu is Associate Professor and associate director at the School of Journalism and Communication, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China, of the Institute of Communication Studies. He is the author of *Engineering the Consent: The Idea of Propaganda and Its Legitimacy in the 20th Century* (2012), *Mass Communication Theory: Paradigms and Schools* (2008), and co-author of *An Introduction to the Media Today* (2005) – all in Chinese. He has translated into Chinese books on communication and journalism such as *Milestones in Mass Communication Research; News That Matters; and Television and American Opinion*. His current research interests include political communication, the history of Chinese communication studies, and the history of communication ideas and media performance in China.

Xinchuan Liu is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, China. He has published 31 papers in leading academic journals, including the *Journal of Journalism and Communication*. He is the author of works such as his *Introduction to Communication Studies*.

Zhengjia Liu (MS, Iowa State University) is a doctoral candidate in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa. Her current research focuses on social media and consumerist culture. She has published in the *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research*.

Casey Man Kong Lum is Professor of Communication and founding director of the MA in professional communication program at William Paterson University. He is one of the five co-founders of the Media Ecology Association and currently on the board of directors of the Urban Communication Foundation. His research and teaching interests include media ecology, urban communication, food culture as communication, media and globalization, Asian and Asian Pacific American studies, international education, and teaching and learning. Among his publications are *In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America* (1996) and *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition* (2006).


Maxwell E. McCombs is the Jesse H. Jones Centennial Chair in Communication Emeritus in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a co-founder of the agenda-setting theory, together with Lei Guo.

Michael Morgan is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has conducted many national and international studies on the effects of television on audience conceptions of violence, sex roles, aging, health, science, the family, political orientations, and other issues.

Vincent Mosco is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada, where he held the Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society. He is the author of numerous books on media and information technology, notably The Digital Sublime and The Political Economy of Communication. He is currently writing a book on cloud computing.

Levi Obonyo is dean of the College of Communications at Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya. He earned the PhD degree from Temple University in Philadelphia. A former journalist, Dr. Obonyo was recently chair of the Media Council of Kenya and host to the first presidential debate ever televised in Kenya. He consults widely on communications education in Africa.

Christine Ogan is Professor Emerita from the School of Journalism and the School of Informatics and Computing at Indiana University. Recently she has been Visiting Professor at Bahcesehir University in Istanbul and at the Baptist University in Honk Kong. She is the author of numerous articles related to communications technology, especially on international topics.

John J. Pauly is provost and Professor of Journalism at Marquette University. From 2006 to 2008 he served as dean of the Diederich College of Communication there.
His research focuses on the history and sociology of the media, with special attention to the history of journalism as literary, institutional, and professional culture.

**W. James Potter** is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California at Santa Barbara and a former editor of the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. He is the creator of lineation theory and has published over 20 books as well as more than 100 scholarly articles about media effects.

**Anabel Quan-Haase** is Associate Professor of Sociology and Information and Media Studies at Western University. Her interests lie in social media, social networks, social capital, inequality, and serendipity. She maintains a web site at SocioDigital.info.

**Babak Rahimi** is Associate Professor of Communication, Culture and Religion at the Department of Literature, University of California, San Diego. He earned his PhD from the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, in October 2004. Rahimi has also studied at the University of Nottingham, where he obtained an MA in ancient and medieval philosophy (1997), and at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he was a visiting fellow in the Department of Anthropology, 2000–2001. He is the author of *Theater-State and Formation of the Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641 c.e.*

**Daniel Romer** is the director of the Adolescent and Health Communication Institutes at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on social influences on the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.

**Mark J. Rozell** is Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia. He is the author of four books on media and US politics and most recently co-author (with Mitchel A. Sollenberger) of *The President’s Czars: Undermining Congress and the Constitution* (2012).

**Haydar Badawi Sadig** is Associate Professor at the Department of Mass Communication of Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. Previously he taught in Sudan, the US, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. He is author and co-author of “Profaning the Sacred: A Prophetic Critique of Consumerism in the Heart of the Muslim World”; “Peace Communication in Sudan: Toward a New Islamic Perspective”; “Communication Technologies in the Arsenal of Al Qaeda and Taliban: Why the West Is Not Winning the War on Terror”; and “Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: Embodying and Communicating Absolute Individual Freedom” – among other titles.

**James Shanahan** is Professor at the College of Communication at Boston University. His research interests focus on cultural indicators, cultivation theory,
media effects, and public opinion. Special areas of interest are communication in relation to science and the environment.

**Nancy Signorielli** is Professor of Communication and Director of the MA program in communication at the University of Delaware. Her research interests include images of sex roles, violence, aging, and minorities on television and how these images are related to conceptions of the social reality.

**Galina V. Sinekopova** is Associate Professor of Communication at Eastern Washington University, Washington. Her research interests include media studies and political communication. Her work has appeared in such journals as the *Journal of Communication*, the *International Journal of Communication*, the *American Journal of Semiotics*, and the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*.

**Ann Snesareva** is an undergraduate student at the American University in Bulgaria majoring in journalism and mass communication. She is from Belarus.

**Linda Steiner** is Professor at the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Previously she was Professor and department chair at Rutgers University. Steiner was an editor of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Her coauthored or co-edited books include *Women and Journalism* and *Key Concepts in Critical Cultural Studies*. She was president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 2011–2012, and in 2012 she was named Outstanding Woman of the Year in Journalism and Mass Communication Education.

**Ksenia Tsitovich** is an undergraduate student at the American University in Bulgaria majoring in journalism and mass communication. She is from Belarus.

**Kasun Ubayasiri** is Sir Samuel Griffith Lecturer in Journalism at Griffith University, Australia. His research interests include the role of media in terrorism and counter-terrorism; and nationalism and identity politics in insurgent terrorism.

**Mel van Elteren** is Associate Professor of Social Sciences at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. His research areas concern sociology, social history, and cultural studies, with special interest in the political economy and cultural complexities of globalization. His latest book is *Labor and the American Left: An Analytical History* (2011).

**Runze Wang** is Professor of School of Journalism, Renmin University of China. She is editor-in-chief of *Journalism Times*. She was named Minde Scholar by Renmin University of China in 2009 and New Century Scholar of Excellence by the ministry of education in 2010. She has been associate director of the History of Journalism Institute, School of Journalism, since 2006. Wang was Yenching-Harvard visiting scholar at Harvard University in 2006–2007.
**Stephen J. A. Ward** is Professor and director of the George S. Turnbull Center in Portland, Oregon. The center is the Portland base of the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism and Communication. Previously he was Burgess Chair of Journalism Ethics and founding director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of the award-winning *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, *Global Journalism Ethics*, *Ethics and the Media: An Introduction* and, most recently, the editor of *Global Media Ethics: Problems and Perspectives*.

**Herman Wasserman** is Professor and deputy head of the School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Recent books include *Tablet Journalism in South Africa: True Story!*, *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* (editor); and *Media Ethics beyond Borders* (co-editor, with Stephen Ward). He edits the journal *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*.

**Ran Wei** is the Gonzales Brothers Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina and Chang Jiang Chair Professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. A former TV journalist and the incoming editor-in-chief of *Mass Communication & Society*, he has published extensively on media effects and communication technology.

**Darya V. Yanitskaya** is an undergraduate student at the American University in Bulgaria majoring in journalism and mass communication. She is from Belarus.

**Alyson L. Young** is a PhD student in human centered computing in the Department of Information Systems at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). Her research interests include social computing, social networks, and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW).

**Cristina Zurutuza-Muñoz** is vice-dean of the School of Communication at San Jorge University, Spain. She has been visiting research scholar at George Washington University, Washington and visiting fellow at Vilnius University, Lithuania. Her research interests include crisis and terrorism communication, political and electoral communication, and public institutions communication. Her lecturing is also related to these fields. She has contributed to the edition of several books on political communication, co-authoring some of them, and has published articles and book chapters nationally and internationally.
Introduction

Media and mass communication theory is both a rich field and a potentially frustrating one. Its richness comes in the first place from the fact that the media themselves are so varied, operate under so many different political and cultural systems, and have such ambiguous connections to their various audiences that there is ample opportunity for theory construction and testing. In the second place it comes from the various methodological approaches that have been developed to test theories or to apply different ideological, cultural, economic, psychological, or social theories within the orbit of media. The reality is that the media do not exist as an independent sphere where they can be neatly envisioned and tested within a closed system, but rather they are in continual flux with other elements of the human experience – a state that makes their operations and impacts both elusive and rich. The frustration comes from the same reality. People want to know, and people assume they know, what media are causing in their societies, even when it has proven impossible to demonstrate cause and effect in a way that would satisfy most statisticians – and, even more to the point, there are wide disagreements among theorists as to whether looking for causation is a reasonable enterprise. Some are convinced that this is the only legitimate social scientific approach of any real value – especially if the issue is influencing public policy applied to media – while others are equally convinced that such endeavors are a fool’s errand.

What we have tried to do in this two-volume handbook is to explore the varieties of theories that have been developed to deal with issues raised by the operations of media in society. We could have expanded these two volumes into four, or even more, if the theoretical approaches explained here had been applied to situations in even more numerous countries than we have included. But this would have had diminishing returns, and so our plan has been to include enough case studies (applications in different contexts) to give a sense of what is possible theoretically when different contexts are taken into account. As a result, we believe that these two volumes provide a rich set of perspectives that can inform efforts to understand
the media around the globe. We have purposely sought out authors not only from different theoretical traditions, but also from different parts of the world. We wanted to see what theories have developed and have been applied in non-Western contexts, both in order to give them the exposure that they deserve outside the “Western canon” and in order to show how they might inform further theory development in the Western world. We also wanted students of media to recognize that there is still much that we do not know about the relationship of media to society or culture and that there are thus many avenues still open for detailed examinations, speculations, and theory development within their own contexts. Those who read the chapters in these volumes should not assume that this is all there is to say about media. Neither should they assume that this is an idiosyncratic selection of media essays. When we were unable to find someone to write about certain topics, we have taken on the task ourselves, so that we could include theories that we thought would move the whole toward comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, a reader might wish he or she had found here a chapter that is “missing,” and we will be the first to admit that this may well be the case. We ask for your indulgence should that occur, and we accept the blame that may be forthcoming for any missing perspectives.

For those of you who wish you had been asked to write, but were not, we wish we had known about your work or application. A reference work of this scope requires far more knowledge of a global theoretical environment than we suspect any of us could hope to achieve. We do think, however, that those scholars we were able to locate from around the planet, and whose work is represented here, all have something valuable to say, and we invite you to explore various options for understanding media and mass communication from their quite different perspectives. We think you will find it a fulfilling use of your time.

We have divided these two volumes into six parts, some containing more chapters than others. We could have filled many volumes with case studies from different parts of the world, but we thought it better to provide illustrative case studies that scholars could use to inform their own work rather than to have a case study on every possible media subject in every region, country, or culture on the planet. The latter would have been far too cumbersome a project; it would probably discourage many people from even attempting to learn from others, because the task would seem overly daunting and burdensome. We all know how much scholars are expected to keep up with as they attempt to understand this discipline completely. We did not want to create more problems than we solved (assuming we did solve any).

One obvious question in theorizing about media and mass communication is what media to include. The worldwide development of the multiplayer and multinational game World of Warcraft (WOW) is just one example of this problem. Is WOW a medium in its own right or merely an application within the medium we know as the world wide web? Or is it an aspect of the more specific use of the web that we refer to as Web 2.0, or the user-generated web? When the New York Times
puts its daily edition on the web, is that two media, or merely one set of content encountered in different ways – perhaps little different from one person sitting at a breakfast table reading the Times while drinking his coffee, a second reading it on a commuter train traveling to the city from Long Island, a third sitting on the subway using her tablet to read it, and a fourth using his smart phone for the same purpose. They are all reading, but their contexts are different – and in many cases their devices are different as well. Now the Times has videos and blogs on its website. How many media are we actually looking at, then? Again, we have tried to include as much of this complexity as we could without overwhelming the reader. We hope it is not too much to ask those who pick up these volumes to read outside their comfort zone – to look at what those from different theoretical or methodological traditions have to say about this matter we study, which is what John Dewey called “the most wonderful” affair: communication. We have certainly had our comfort zones stretched and have learned immeasurably more from the task of putting this book together than we anticipated. We hope it can have the same result for all of you.

As to the specific content, there are, as we said, six parts. Part I covers what we call classical theories of media and the press and includes attention to history, political economy, symbols and semiotics, media effects, media ecology, dramatistic and ritual theories, propaganda and “technics.” This is one of the two longest parts of the book (in terms of number of chapters) and will give every reader a full quiver of possibilities in thinking about the media in specific contexts.

The second part deals with theories about audiences, social construction, and social control. Some theories that you might think belong in the “classical tradition,” such as agenda setting and uses and gratifications, are here, and we hope they are useful in helping you see how these theories can be used in contexts outside their original formulations. There are also chapters on the social construction (actually, cultural construction) of news, on the development of identity, and on the relationship between the public, civil society and the public sphere, both in domestic and international settings.

The third part we’ve called “New Approaches and Reconsiderations.” Here you will find feminist theory, postcolonial theory, cultural imperialism, nonviolence, and media policy discussed. You will also find cultivation theory applied in new contexts, and a discussion of globalization and cultural identity.

Part IV is devoted to new technologies. There are chapters on the philosophy of technology and perspectives on its social construction. Social networking, video games, the communication divide, consumption of media with an emphasis on Twitter, and the Internet are all the focus of chapters here.

The fifth part provides case studies from a variety of countries, as well as paying attention to theory development from different religious traditions.

The last part is the shortest: only one chapter. Here is where we try to outline what we think might be future directions for mass communication and media
theory. We could be wrong, of course, as prognostication is a dangerous business. Our approach here is based on all that we have seen in the course of collecting, reading, and editing the fifty or so chapters in this reference book. There is still much work to be done – on virtually all the theoretical concepts covered here. We hope these two volumes can contribute to the worldwide conversation about a rich field for study.

Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler
Part 1

Classical Theories of Media
and the Press
The liberal theory of the press believes that news media should be free to report on public issues so that crucial features of liberal society can be maintained, for example the protection of rights such as free speech, or the monitoring of abuses of power. Some theories of the press, such as the authoritarian view, reject the priority of a free press. Others, for instance a communitarian approach, may support the idea of a free press while placing equal, if not greater, stress on other values, such as the creation of community and social solidarity. The liberal theory distinguishes itself, historically and doctrinally, through its enthusiasm for the freedom to speak and to publish. In many cases where press behavior is in question, the liberal theory argues that the freedom to publish trumps other values.¹

What is “classical” liberal theory, then? Classical liberal theory is libertarian press theory as developed in the nineteenth century. It is “classical” by virtue of being the original liberal theory. Libertarian press theory was the first explicit formulation of liberalism’s view of the role of the press in society. In time, other formulations of liberal theory were constructed, until “liberal theory” came to refer to a variety of positions, as it does today. All these positions place emphasis on a free press but differ on the amount of freedom required and on the extent to which other values, such as minimizing harm, should ethically restrain the freedom to publish.

This chapter probes into classical liberal theory by describing its origins and by comparing it with later forms of liberal theory. It also considers its theoretical adequacy today and the question of the form of liberal theory that is most relevant to current discussions about news media.

¹ I begin by outlining the history of the Western free press. I discuss the enthusiasm, among many liberals, for a libertarian press in the 1800s and the subsequent
disillusionment with libertarian theory as the power of the press grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I explain how disillusionment gave birth to modern journalism ethics and to variations on the liberal theory.

I conclude that the best form of liberal theory today is a theory that takes the promotion of deliberative democracy in pluralistic democracies as its guiding aim. I argue that neither the classical liberal theory nor current neoliber- tarian approaches constitute an adequate theory, because none of these makes deliberative journalism its primary aim.

Origins and Optimism

Challenging the authoritarian system

The history of the Western press has been the subject of many publications, and I have traced the history of journalism ethics (Ward, 2005). Therefore this chapter will not duplicate earlier efforts. Instead I will only outline the main stages that lead to the liberal theory of the press.2

This history can be divided into the following stages: (1) seventeenth century: challenge to the authoritarian theory of the press; (2) eighteenth century: creation of a “public” press – a fourth estate that represents the public; (3) nineteenth century: development of a liberal press theory of a libertarian cast; (4) twentieth century to the present: criticism of the libertarian theory, leading to variations in liberal theory and to alternate views.

The seventeenth century is important for understanding the origins of liberal theory because in this period we witness a challenge to the first “theory” of (or approach to) the fledgling periodic news press. This first theory or approach was the authoritarian view of the press, as embraced by monarchs, church officials, the military, and other elite groups. In the twentieth century the authoritarian view evolved into totalitarian and communist views of the press, which saw it as a vehicle of propaganda for the utopian societies envisaged by totalitarian and communist leaders and thinkers. For instance, Lenin regarded the press as a tool in the service of the Communist Party and its revolution and for the prevention of a counter-revolution. Today the authoritarian view is enforced in many nondemocratic or marginally democratic countries such as China, Burma, and Iran.

The authoritarian approach was (and is) the opposite of the liberal theory of the press. The authoritarian view believes that the primary role of the press is to support authority – established power and, in many cases, a rigid, hierarchical society. The press exists not to serve a public, let alone a liberal public of free and equal citizens. It exists to serve the state, identified with a leader or an oligopoly whose aim is to exercise political power and to maintain law and order over “subjects” (not over citizens). On this view, uncensored or unregulated news publications are inherently dangerous to the stability of the state and are therefore regarded as going against the national interest. Publication is not a right of the citizens; it is a
privilege extended to publishers. Establishing who should publish and how is the prerogative of the authorities.

The challenge to this view began slowly. In the early 1600s printer-editors in Amsterdam, London, and other major centers experimented with selling news to the public. They did so carefully, in full view of kings and censors. Gradually editors became bolder. Journalists, originally in England and then in parts of Europe and the United States, began to agitate against the authoritarian system. These pioneering editors should not be confused with the professional and impartial journalists of modern news organizations. They were an eclectic group of religious dissidents, reformist editors, entrepreneurial publishers, government officials, and academics (Ward, 2005, pp. 89–127). Many took up journalism to advance their ideas and their group. Some published illegal broadsheets to challenge absolute monarchs or an established church. Nor were these publishers watchdogs for liberal society. Liberal society did not exist. Liberals did not exist. Many of the early journalists, despite their fiery views, were traditionalists or conservatives.

The authoritarian system was weakened by a two-fold development – a decline in absolute government and the inability of officials to stem the tide of new publications, which in turn stimulated public demand for more publications. It was in England that this weakening of authoritarian control went furthest. A freer English press emerged at times of political turmoil – such as the collapse of central authority during the English Civil War and the periods of strong opposition to the Stuart monarchy. In 1695 the English Parliament allowed the Printing Act to expire. England became the first country in Europe to end the system of licensing (and prior censorship) of the press.

The end of press licensing allowed the newspaper to become a medium for the public sphere emerging with the Enlightenment (Ward, 2005, pp. 128–173). There was in practice an explosion of new types of newspapers in London and across Britain. This freedom was not matched across the Channel, where the press continued to labor under absolute government and strict press controls. Yet in Enlightenment France, for example, monarchs could not repress the growth of papers and journals, although they attempted to control it. No fewer than 1,267 periodic journals were established in France between 1600 and 1789, many dealing with scientific and artistic matters (Burke, 2000, pp. 47–48).

The eighteenth-century idea that newspapers addressed an autonomous “public” and helped to create public opinion – an opinion designed to guide and restrict government – was a new challenge to the authoritarian view. Newspapers claimed to be “tribunes” of the public, and by this they were referring to the Roman tribunes, who spoke for the people. The philosophy of a free press was forged not in philosophy books but in the writings of audacious journalists, in judgments of jurists, in famous conflicts between editors and government, and in the philosophical writings of Hume, Jefferson, Erskine, and Condorcet.

In England, from 1720 to 1723, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon published anonymously, in the London Journal, the famous 144 “Cato” letters that railed against “wicked ministers” who “enslave their country.” On February 4, 1720,
the fifteenth “Cato” letter presented its famous argument that freedom of the press was “inseparable from public liberty” (Ward, 2005, pp. 152–153). Cato’s arguments, republished in the American colonies by Benjamin Franklin, played a role in the 1735 acquittal of John Peter Zenger for criticizing the governor of New York. From the 1760s onward, the clearest demands for freedom to publish come from a new generation of journalists pushing for more far-reaching reform and, in some cases, revolution. The press was aligned against a common enemy: corrupt, unrepresentative, and tyrannical government. In America, Tom Paine campaigned for the “rights of man” and the American Revolution. In England, the liberty of the press was a central issue in the infamous clashes between an unpopular Hanover monarchy and John Wilkes, MP and editor of the London weekly *The North Briton* (Ward, 2005, p. 157). Eventually this freer press played major roles in the American and French revolutions. After the revolutions, the right to free expression and to a free press was made part of the constitutions of America and France.

The start of the nineteenth century, however, seemed to roll back these victories for the press. Napoleon swept across Europe and reinstated press controls. However, the struggles of the press were part of the liberal movements that sparked revolutions across Europe in 1848 and beyond. By the end of the nineteenth century a substantial “negative liberty” of the press – the right not to be interfered with – would be achieved across most of Europe and North America. In country after country, post-publication press controls and crippling taxes on newspapers were reduced and more liberal societies were established. By the end of the nineteenth century the Western press as a whole could be properly described as a free press.

**A libertarian press**

The “liberty of the press” was therefore central to debates about the role of the eighteenth-century public press. However, the theory of a fourth-estate “public” press is not the same as the nineteenth-century conception of the press as an agent of liberalism. Two things were missing. First, what was missing was an explicit (and widely accepted) liberal view of society – that is, the notion of a society that exists so that individuals may flourish, and of a society that takes its main duty to be the protection of basic liberties, regarding them as essential to human flourishing. Second, what was missing was the concept of a liberal (or libertarian) press. A libertarian press was not just a relatively free press, but a *maximally* free press. Only in the nineteenth century, with the development of liberalism, did both ideas come to dominate thinking on the press and society. Liberal theory transformed the eighteenth-century idea of a press that represents the public into a more specific and more demanding one: the idea of a maximally free press where liberal views could be advanced.

Libertarian press theory was an extension of liberalism to the press (Siebert, 1956). In economics, liberalism supported the policy of *laissez faire* – a free economic marketplace without excessive government interference. Liberalism also