

Lecture- 02



Theories of Media

Theories of Press

Mass media does not operate in a vacuum; the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Normative theories were first proposed by Fred, Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called “Four Theories of the Press”. At first the word “Normative Theory” was pronounced in USA during the height of ‘cold war’ with communism and soviet. Often it called as western theories of mass media.

A Normative theory describes an ideal way for a media system to be controlled and operated by the government, authority, leader and public. These theories are basically different from other communication theories because normative theories of press are not providing any scientific explanations or prediction. At the same these “four theories of the press” came from many sources rather than a single source. Sometimes media practitioners, social critics and academics also involved to develop these normative theories. Normative theories are more focused in the relationship between Press and the Government than press and the audience. These theories are more concern about the ownership of the media and who controls the press or media in the country.

By contrast, normative statements affirm how things should or ought to be, how to value them, and which things are good or bad. Normative theories are divided into the following categories:

1. Authoritarian:

Long before democratic societies could think of matters pertaining to freedom of speech, there existed a thought that the emergence of media should not challenge the writ of the government which were more in dictatorial form and less they looked like democracies. The media was forced to remain under state control. It had following features which, in non-democratic governments still rule on media:

- a) Direct governmental control of the media. Typical to pre-democratic societies, where the government consists of very small ruling-class.

- b) No printing that could undermine the established authority or offense to existing political set up.
- c) The government may punish anyone who questions the state's ideology and the Media professionals are not allowed to have any independence within the media organization.
- d) Registration of the media by the state.

This theory developed in the 16th and 17th centuries and was mainly based on absolute power of the monarchy (truth). It was essential that the Press supports monarchy and couldn't criticise it. This approach was designed to protect the established social order, setting clear limits to media freedom and ensure that it is not the media which must talk about people and their problems in any manner. According to this theory, mass media, though not under the direct control of the State, had to follow its bidding.

This Theory Envisages:

- i. The government consists of a very limited and small ruling-class and media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority of the government.
- ii. Any offense to the existing political values should be avoided and the government may punish anyone who questions the state's ideology.
- iii. The government is infallible and the media professionals are therefore not allowed to have any independence within the media organization.
- iv. Foreign media are subordinate to the established authority, in that all imported media products are controlled by the state.

Steps were taken to control the freedom of expression. The result was advocacy of complete dictatorship. The theory promoted zealous obedience to a hierarchical superior and reliance on threat and punishment to those who did not follow the censorship rules or did not respect authority. Censorship of the press was justified on the ground that the State always took precedence over the individual's right to freedom of expression.

This theory stemmed from the authoritarian philosophy of Plato (407 - 327 B.C), who thought that the State was safe only in the hands of a few wise men. Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679), a British academician, argued that the power to maintain order was sovereign and individual objections were to be ignored. Engel, a German thinker further reinforced the theory by stating that freedom came into its supreme right only under Authoritarianism. The world has been witness to authoritarian means of control over media by both dictatorial and democratic governments.

This theory essentially applies to authoritarian societies, but can surface in less authoritarian societies (particularly in times of war, terrorism). It depends on the medium/ media of press subject to a greater control in some countries. There are certain assumptions attached to the Authoritarian approach, which are as follows:

- a) Press should do nothing to undermine vested power and interests;
- b) Press should be subordinate to vested power and authority;
- c) Press should avoid acting in contravention of prevailing moral and political values;
- d) Censorship justified in the application of these principles;
- e) Criminalisation of editorial attacks on vested power, deviations from official policy, violation of moral codes.
- f) Media is an instrument/ mouthpiece to publicise and propagandise government ideology and actions.
- g) Absolute power of state versus subservience of the individual & press.

These assumptions in turn help us in understanding the basic premise of the theory. It explains the principles on which this theory is based and the approach which the authoritarian society used to follow. The biggest examples of this theory are: Fascist regimes, some African countries, communist countries, Aspects of apartheid etc.