

Normative Theories of Press I

Normative theories were first proposed by Fred, Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called "Four Theories of the Press". Often it called as western theories of mass media.

The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates.

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.

Authoritarian Theory:

Long before the 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 predemocratic 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 monarchies. It was essential that the Press supports monarchy and couldn't criticize 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.

Important features of era: The government consists of a very limited and small ruling-class. Media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority of the government.

Any offense to the existing political values should be avoided and the government may punish anyone who questions the state's ideology.

The government is infallible and the media professionals are therefore not allowed to have any independence within the media organization.

Foreign media are subordinate to the established authority, in that all imported media products are controlled by the state.

The theory suggests a hierarchical superior and reliance on threat and punishment to those who did not follow the censorship rules or did not respect authority.

This theory stemmed from Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679), a British academician, argued that the power to maintain order was sovereign and individual objections were to be ignored.

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 publicize and propagandize government ideology and actions.

Libertarian Theory:

This theory is just in contrast to the authoritarian approach to media. Press informs, entertains, sells and helps in discovering the truth.

It is a free marketplace of ideas where anyone can publish his/ her views and expressions but cannot defame or be obscene. There shall be minimum checks and balances by the government.

The libertarians had a very modern approach which serve the purposes of the modern society based on rise of democracy, religious freedom, expansion of economic freedom.

Its prominent features are as follows: a) Competitive exposure of alternative viewpoints. b) Attacks on the government's policies are accepted and even encouraged c) Journalists and media professionals ought to have full autonomy within the media organization. d) There is no explicit connection between the government and the media. e) The press is free from censorship f) It is accountable to the law for any consequences of its activities that infringe other individuals' rights or the legitimate claims of the society. g) In rebelling against authoritarian theory early libertarians argued that there should be no laws governing media operations. Free press means that all forms of media must be totally unregulated.

Libertarians argued that if individuals could be freed from arbitrary limits on communication imposed by church and state, they would "naturally" follow the dictates of their conscience, seek truth, engage in public debate, and ultimately create a better life for themselves and others. They believed strongly in the power of unrestricted public debate and discussion to create more natural way of structuring society.

These libertarian principles were also adopted in the "Bill of Rights". (First 10 amendments to U.S. constitution). It asserted that all individuals have natural rights no government, community, or group can unduly infringe upon or take away.

To print or broadcast ideas, opinions and beliefs- all of these rights are proclaimed as central to democratic self-government.

Problems of libertarian media: Do media professionals have the right to produce and distribute anything that will earn profits, or should some limits be placed on them?

Such an extensive freedom is also a problem as all people have the right to speak and receive information freely, but no one takes responsibility of the wrong doings.

The protection of dignity, reputation, property, privacy, moral development of individuals, groups, minorities, evens the security of the state no infringement accepted from media.

Classical liberal perspective: a) Free market as foundation of free media b) Freedom to publish without prior restriction independence from government c) Public has access to wide diversity of opinion (only limitation on freedom to publish is public willingness to pay) d) Market-based diversity promotes public rationality free marketplace of ideas and information as a self-righting mechanism, minimizes bias and exposes weak arguments and evidence.

Another strand in liberal tradition presents media as representative agency or as a watchdog protecting the public from state. Press is source of information and platform for expression of a range of divergent opinions; enables people to monitor government and form ideas about policy.

Basic features of theory: a) Press should be free from any external censorship b) Publication and distribution should be accessible to any individual or group with a permit or license c) Attacks on governments or parties should not be punishable d) No coercion to publish anything e) Freedom of access to information. f) libertarian view rests on the idea that the individual should be free to publish whatever he or she likes attacks on the government's policies are fully accepted and even encouraged g) no restrictions on import or export of media messages across the national frontiers h) journalists and media professionals have full autonomy within the media organization.