

# OVERVIEW OF NORMATIVE THEORIES

## Introduction

## Objectives

## Normative Theories

### Authoritarian Media Theory

### Free Press or Libertarian Media Theory

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 since they do not provide any scientific explanations or prediction.

. There are essentially four normative theories of the press. They were first proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called Four Theories of the Press. In this unit, we will study the Authoritarian Media Theory and the Libertarian or Free Press Media Theory.

## NORMATIVE THEORIES

Apart from various theories propounded in the last seventy or eighty years, there are four major theories of press also known as the normative theories. They explain how media 'ought to' operate under the prevailing political and economical setup. It is a well-known fact that every society controls the mass media according to its needs and policies and for doing so it formulates certain guidelines of media or press. The following theories precisely explain the various philosophies guiding societies and its press.

### Authoritarian Media Theory

Mass media, although free in general sense, has to function under state controls. Freedom of thought, according to authoritarian approach, was guarded jealously, by the few individuals in the ruling classes, who are worried about the emergence of a new middle class and the impact of media on the middle class thought process. The ruling class always tried to control the freedom of expression. The authoritarian approach promoted blind obedience to the superiors on the ladder, and used threats and punishments to control those who

bypassed the censorship or the regulation of the authorities. Press censorship was justified and defended on the grounds that the state, as the caretaker of the people, should always take precedence over the freedom of expression of the people. This approach justified itself on the basis of Plato's (407–327 BC) authoritarian philosophy, who believed only a few wise men at the top can keep the state safe. A British academician, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), argued that maintaining order is the sovereign duty and individual objections have to be ignored. Friedrich Engels, a German thinker posited that only authoritarianism can ensure and protect the right to freedom. We have witnessed during last century how authoritarian and democratic governments controlled the media.

**Free Press or Libertarian Media Theory** This theory advocates removal of all restraints on media. The theory has its origins in the seventeenth century England where the invention and spread printing press took place. Printing press for the first time could generate thousands of copies of books or pamphlets at affordable prices. The state was believed to be a source of interference on the individual's rights and his property. Libertarians treated taxation as a theft by the authorities. This theory purported that popular will (*vox populi*) should precede the power of state. Advocates of this theory were, an early sixteenth century philosopher, Lao Tzu; a seventeenth century British philosopher, John Locke; the epic poet (*Aeropagitica*), John Milton; and an essayist (who has written *On Liberty*), John Stuart Mill. In his *Aeropagitica* of 1644, Milton stated that there should be freedom expression and 'let truth and falsehood grapple.' After the French revolution, the new republican government in its Declaration of the Rights of Man, stated that 'Every citizen may speak, write and publish freely.' Out of such doctrines emerged the concept of the 'free market of ideas.' George Orwell, a British writer, defined libertarianism as 'allowing people to say things you do not want to hear'. According to libertarians, the press must play the role of Fourth Estate where it should reflect the public opinion.

## **Social Responsibility Theory**

In their book *Four Theories of Press*, Wilbur Schramm, Siebert and Theodore Paterson, criticized the 'free press theory' stating 'pure libertarianism is antiquated, outdated and obsolete.' They advocated that the 'social responsibility theory' is more relevant and practical than the 'free press theory'. The social responsibility theory was evoked by the Commission of The Freedom of Press in US, in 1949. The free market approach to press freedom according to the commission had only increased the power of ruling and wealthy classes. And it had not served the interests of the underprivileged and the poor. The emergence and spread of movies, radio and TV necessitated some sort of accountability on the part of media. A judicious mix of state regulation, self-regulation, professional standards and ethics were imperative.

Social responsibility theory thus advocates a conscientious practice of media ethics should precede the right of free expression. The social responsibility theory is one among other press theories. It is considered as a theory that should serve to the achievement of valid societal goals. Accordingly, the media have responsibilities toward society; the media should

be available to more than a marginal group of people. It should be more representative and should present more than the opinions of influential politicians.

It was the American commission of 1947 that provided the philosophical basis to the social responsibility tradition, but it was actually put into practice with much more determination and effects in other countries, especially in Western Europe in the two or three decades following the World War II.

According to the social responsibility model, the state could play an important role in ensuring that media fulfils their social obligations whilst retaining their independence and the freedom of the speech. Mass media should provide citizens with information, identify the problems in the society, and expose the unlawful activities of those who have power. Media also should have mobilization function, campaigning for societal purposes in the areas of politics and economic development. So, everywhere, social tasks come prior to media rights and freedoms.

## **Communist Media Theory**

Marx and Engels posited the communist media theory according to which 'the ideas of the ruling classes are the ruling ideas'. They believed the bourgeois ideology pervaded throughout the mass media. Lenin strongly believed that the existence of private ownership is incompatible with the freedom of press. He thought that information generated with the help of modern technology must be controlled to ensure the freedom of press. The communist media theory advocated that the responsibility of mass media was educating the masses of workers and peasants rather than simply giving out information. The public must be encouraged to give feedback which helps the media to cater to the public interests. The theory justifies the state control on the basis of the communist theory that the socialist revolution would be led by the proletariat comprising of peasants and workers. The socialist state would be ruled by the communist party, which is the vanguard of peasants and workers. According to Marx, Engels and Lenin a socialist framework ensures a real democracy compared to bourgeois democracies which are the democracies for the rich and elite. Hence, the state would control the press so that nothing is allowed to be published which is against the interests of the peasantry and working class.

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