

Normative Theories – Four Theories of the Press

Introduction:

Normative theories were first proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore 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” were 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.

The four theories of the Press/Media

- Authoritarian theory
- Libertarian theory
- Social responsibility theory
- Soviet media theory

Few questions will helps to understand the needs of the normative theories

1. Is media can published or broadcast any type’s of content will earn more profits in a shortest time? (think about Yellow journalism / Talbots)
2. Is media can provide any public service even if no immediate profits can be earned?
3. Is media can participate in any issues and solving the social problems?
4. Is it essential for media to protect the consumers from the culprits, business frauds and corrupt bureaucrats by serving as a watch dog?
5. What people expect from media during the time of crisis?
6. Is media should broadcast the highly rated content even if it has high level of violence?
7. Is a newspaper publishing the unethical business content to encourage the company for its higher advertisements pay?

These questions are linked and concerned about the media day-to-day activities.

Authoritarian Theory

Authoritarian theory describe that all forms of communications are under the control of the governing elite or authorities or influential bureaucrats.

Authoritarians are necessary to control the media to protect and prevent the people from the national threats through any form communication (information or news). The press is an instrument to enhance the ruler's power in the country rather than any threats. The authorities have all rights to permit any media and control it by providing license to the media and make certain censorship.

If any media violate the government policies against license, then the authority has all right to cancel the license and revoke it. The government have all right to restrict any sensitive issues from press to maintain peace and security in the nation.

Censorship:

Censorship is a suppression of any communication which may consider as harmful to the people, King, government and its nation. Especially these censorship methods are much familiar in press which against the freedom of speech and freedom of expression. In some other cases, the censorship helps to protect the rulers and authorities from sensitive issues.

There are different types of censors like

- Political censor
- Moral censor
- Religious censor
- Military censor
- Corporate censor

Examples of Authoritarian theory:



For right Nikolai Yezhov, standing near Stalin was removed from this photograph after he shot dead in 1940. These types of censors are common during Stalin's reign.

- Here, Journalist or any media persons should not have any rights to comment, discriminate or stand against the government. Sometimes, an authority gives considerable freedom to minority thoughts and cultural issues to promote them if it doesn't make any threats to authority or ruler.
- King – King is the authority, who has all rights to control the communication and no one can question against the king.
- Dictatorship – During the world war II Hitler and Mussolini are the two major authorities who controlled the press in Germany and Italy. Press was under the control of the authority and No press can't question against or publish against these two dictators.
- Few countries blocked wiki leaks website from its country to maintain the internal security because the wiki leaks are not ready to compromise with government censorship and realising classified documents against the government.

Libertarian Theory

The Libertarian theory is one of the “Normative theories of press”. The theory which is originally came from libertarian thoughts from 16th century in Europe. The libertarian theorists are against the authoritarian thoughts. International trade and urbanization undermine the power of a rural aristocracy which leads various social movements raise includes the Protestants reformation, that demands individual's freedom and their own lives and free thoughts. Liberalism means information is knowledge and knowledge is power. Libertarianism is free from any authority or any control or censorship. The libertarianism is an idea of individualism and limited government which is not harmful to another.

Libertarian theory sees people are more enough to find and judge good ideas from bad. The theory says people are rational and their rational thoughts lead them to find out what are good and bad. The press should not restrict anything even a negative content may give knowledge and can make better decision whilst worst situation. The libertarian thoughts are exactly against or opposite to the authoritarian theory which means the authoritarian theory says “all forms of communication works under the control of government or elite like king”.

Strength and Weakness:

1. Freedom of press will give more freedom to media to reveal the real thing happening in the society without any censorship or any authority blockades.
2. Is reliable with U.S media traditions.
3. It gives more values for individuals to express their thoughts in media.
4. Theory excessively positive about media's willing to meet responsibilities which may leads people into negative aspects.
5. Is too positive about individual ethics and rationality.
6. Ignores need for reasonable control of media.
7. Ignores dilemmas posed by conflicting freedoms.

Example:

Wiki leaks website published all sorts of confidential or restricted files in public space and especially classified documents. These articles are providing brief knowledge about the government and its activities which helps people to identify what is happening in the society and its gives great choices to elect a better president in future.

Sometimes these documents may work against the government and its authority that is why most of the country is not willing to allow libertarian thoughts because it may affect their power and kingdom.

Social Responsibility Theory

In mid-20th century most of the developing countries and third world nations have used this social responsibility theory of press which is associated with “the Commission of the Freedom of Press” in United States at 1949. In the book “Four theories of Press” (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm) it’s been stated that “pure libertarianism is antiquated, out dated and obsolete.” That paved way for replacement of Libertarian theory with the Social responsibility theory.

Social responsibility theory allows free press without any censorship but at the same time the content of the press should be discussed in public panel and media should accept any obligation from public interference or professional self-regulations or both. The theory lies between both authoritarian theory and libertarian theory because it gives total media freedom in one hand but the external controls in other hand. Here, the press ownership is private. The social responsibility theory moves beyond the simple “Objective” reporting (facts reporting) to “Interpretative” reporting (investigative reporting). The total news is complete facts and truthful but the commission of the freedom press stated that “No longer giving facts truthfully rather than give a necessary analysed or interpretative report on facts with clear explanations”.

The theory helped in creating professionalism in media by setting up a high level of accuracy, truth, and information. The commission of press council also included some tasks based on social responsibility of media, which are as follows:

1. Formulate the code of conduct for the press.
2. Improve the standards of journalism.
3. Safeguarding the interests of journalism and journalist.
4. Criticise and make some penalty for violating the code of conduct.

The theory allows

1. Everyone to say something or express their opinion about the media.
2. Community opinion, Consumer action and professional ethics.
3. Serious invasion of recognized private rights and vital social interests.
4. Private ownership in media may give better public service unless government has to take over to assure the public to provide better media service.
5. Media must take care of social responsibility and if they do not, government or other organisation will do.

Soviet Media Theory

After the 1917th revolution, the Soviet Union was restructured with new political system based on the Marxist-Leninist principles. The newly formed communist party by Lenin shows much interest in the media which serves to the working class in the country and their welfares. So the Soviet originates a theory from Marxist, Leninist and Stalinist thoughts, with mixture of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel ideology is called “**Soviet Media Theory**” is also known as “**The Communist Media Theory**”. The same theory was developed and followed by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy.

Soviet media theory is imitative of Leninist principles which based on the Carl Marx and Engel’s ideology. The government undertake or controls the total media and communication to serve working classes and their interest. Theory says the state have absolute power to control any media for the benefits of people. They put end to the private ownership of the press and other media. The government media provide positive thoughts to create a strong socialized society as well as providing information, education, entertainment, motivation and mobilization. The theory describe the whole purpose of the mass media is to educate the greater masses of working class or workers. Here, the public was encouraged to give feedback which would able to create interests towards the media.

According to authoritarian theory, the media controlled and censored by the ministries in the country but libertarian is fully free without any intervention of any authority or government, Social responsibility theory – press freedom in one hand but other hand they controlled the press by raising question and Soviet media theory, the whole control of the media is under the leader of the nation.