

## **Lesson – V**

### **PRESS THEORIES**

This unit discusses about the four theories of press in detail. Western theories of the mass media (particularly of the news media) were first propounded by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their ‘four theories of the Press’. These theories have now come to be termed ‘normative’ in the sense that they ‘mainly express ideas of how the media ought to, or can be expected to, operate under a prevailing set of conditions and values.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

- To understand the different theories of mass communication
- To understand the different types of media

#### **STRUCTURE**

- Theories of Press/Media
- Authoritarian Theory
- Libertarian or Free Press Theory
- Social Responsibility Theory
- The Soviet Communist/ Workers Theory
- Development Media Theory

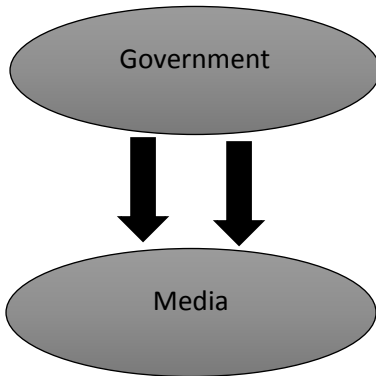
- Democratic Participant Theory
- Summary
- Questions for Discussion

## **THEORIES OF PRESS/MEDIA**

The ‘original’ four theories of the press/media are: authoritarian theory, libertarian theory, social responsibility theory, and soviet media theory. Each of them suits particular political and economic circumstances, and focuses not so much on the relationship between the press and Government. The major concern is with ownership and control rather than with different perspectives of Journalism or the people’s right to information.

### **AUTHORITARIAN THOERY**

This theory along with the invention of printing press was born in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This places superiority over the government which rules the country. According to this theory the mass media, though not under the direct control of the State and the ruling classes, must do their bidding.



The press and other media are expected to respect authority, to be always subordinate to established power and authority, and therefore should avoid offending the majority or dominant moral, political and economic values. Journalists lack independence and freedom; their reports have to be submitted for advance censorship. This censorship is justified on the ground that the State must always take precedence over an individual's right to freedom of expression. Such censorship is more rigidly enforced in times of war and during 'internal' and 'external' emergencies. It needs to be noted that both dictatorial and democratic regimes resort to such authoritarian control of the media. The strictness with which the Official Secrets Act is enforced in Britain and in India is a case in point.

### **LIBERTARIAN OR FREE PRESS THEORY**

Fredrick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm's go on to explain the libertarian theory, which

is also called the free press theory. In contrast to the authoritarian theory, the libertarian view rests on the idea that the individual should be free to publish whatever he or she likes. Its history traces to the 17<sup>th</sup> century's thinker John Milton, who asserted that human beings inevitably choose the best ideas and values. In the libertarian system, attacks on the government's policies are fully accepted and even encouraged. Moreover, there should be no restrictions on import or export of media messages across the National frontiers. Moreover, journalists and media professionals ought to have full autonomy within the media organization.



It is hard to find intact examples of libertarian media systems in today's world. The U.S. will in many aspects come close, but this country's media system has have tendencies of authoritarianism as well. As this illustration shows, there is no explicit connection between the government and the media in the libertarian theory:

today the open market place of ideas and the self-righting process defines the boundaries of the libertarian theory of the press. In the seventeenth century John Milton defended the concepts of reason and the moral integrity of man in telling right from wrong, good from bad, and truth from falsehood in a powerful argument for intellectual freedom.

Libertarian theory is based on the fundamental right of an individual to freedom of expression, which is regarded as main legitimating principle for print media in liberal democracies. In its simple form, it prescribes that an individual should be free to publish what he or she likes, it is thus extension of other rights to hold opinions freely, to express them, to assemble and organize with others.

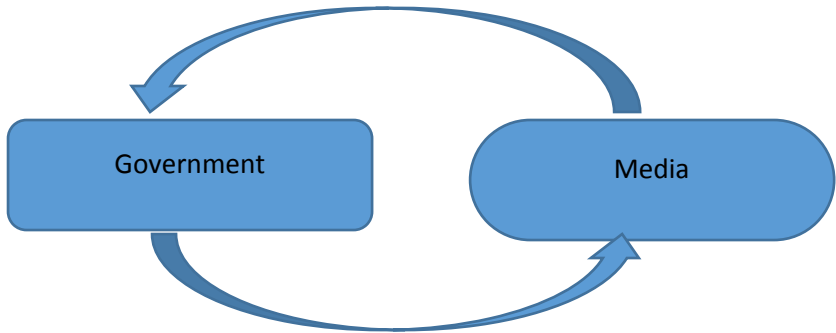
The free press theory needs no elaborations as is evident from the first amendment to the American constitution, which states that ‘congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech or the press, it is thus simply an absolute right of the citizen’. But the application of the press freedom has hardly been straightforward. Milton, Stuart Mill and many others

argued that if freedom is abused to the extent of threatening good morals and the authority of the state, it must be restrained

## **SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY**

Print media by the turn of this century had passed through a phase of yellow journalism. In the atmosphere of a multimedia society, developed a theory of a free but responsible press. An outgrowth of libertarian theory, this philosophy places responsibility over the free press. The press in spite of having a right to criticize the government has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society.

Social responsibility consciousness saw several professional associations like the Society of Newspaper Editors, Society of Professional Journalists etc to exercise self-restraint in order to keep up the high standards of journalism. Within the frame work of open and free criticism, professional choice and guidelines for responsible action on the part of members of the press lies the social responsibility theory.



The social responsibility theory is an extension of the libertarian theory in that the press recognizes that it has the responsibility to society to carry out its essential functions. The social responsibility theory ascribes basically the same six functions to the press as the libertarian theory.

- Providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.
- Instructing and informing the public to make it capable of self-government
- Protecting the rights of the individual against the government through its watchdog function

- Maintaining the economic equilibrium of the system by bringing together buyer, seller, and advertiser.
- Providing entertainment
- Remaining independent of outside pressures by maintaining its own economic self-sufficiency.

The basic principles of the social responsibility theory uphold conflict resolution through discussion; there is high regard for public opinion, consumer action, and professional ethics and jealous guard over private rights and important social interests. This theory emerged in the United States in the twentieth century, and it is evidenced today in the Anglo-American nations.

The social responsibility theory is based on the assumption that media serve essential functions in society. Therefore, it should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society. These obligations are to be met by setting high professional standards in communication of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. In accepting and discharging these obligations, the media should be self-regulatory within the framework of law and



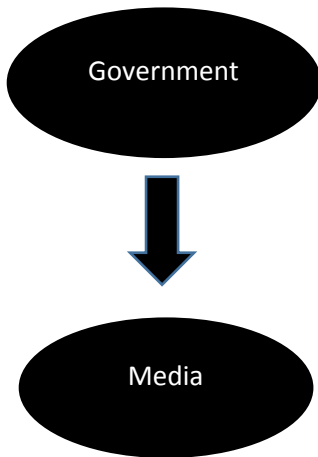
established institutions. In the public interest, the media should underplay that news which might lead to crime, violence, and social tension or cause offence to ethnic or religious minorities. The media should be pluralist, should reflect the diversity of their society and allow access to various points of view including the right to reply.

### **THE SOVIET COMMUNIST/ WORKERS THEORY**

The Soviet communist/workers theory is closely tied to a specific ideology; the communist. Siebert traces the roots of this theory back to the 1917 Russian Revolution based on the postulates of Marx and Engels. The media organizations in this system were to serve the interests of the working class and not intended to be privately owned. An illustration of the Soviet system would appear to be the same as the authoritarian model, in that both theories acknowledge the government as superior to the media institutions.

However, there is a major difference between the two theories that needs to be clarified. The mass media in the Soviet model are expected to be self-regulatory with

regard to the content of their messages. Also, the Soviet theory differs from the authoritarian theory in that the media organizations have a certain responsibility to meet the wishes of their audience.



Still the underlying standard is to provide a complete and objective view of the world according to Marxist – Leninist principles. Today, the name of this theory is only of historical interests. Beginning in the mid-eighties and continuing after the fall of

the Soviet Union, Russia has performed a mass media model closer to the social responsibility principle. The Soviet Theory is also called as the Communist media theory. Just as the social responsibility theory is an outgrowth of the libertarian theory, soviet-communist theory is an outgrowth of the authoritarian theory. However, whereas according to the authoritarian theory the press resides outside the government, in the soviet

media theory is to ensure the success and continuance of the soviet socialist system and to promote the objectives of the soviet socialist party. This system is found mainly in the Soviet Union and other communist countries. Russian media was reorganized after the revolution of 1917 and this theory is derived mainly from basic tenets of Marx and Engles. It envisages media to be under the control of the working class whose interest they are meant to serve.

Private ownership of the press or other media is ruled out. The media must serve positive functions in society relating to information, education, motivation, and mobilization. They must support progressive movements in the country and abroad. The media according to this theory are subject to the ultimate control of the state and are integrated with other instruments of political life. Within these limits, the media are expected to be self-regulatory. They must

- Act with responsibility
- Evolve and follow norms of professional conduct, and

- Respond to people's needs and aspirations.

The media as per this theory are not subject to arbitrary interference as in the case of the authoritarian theory.

## **DEVELOPMENT MEDIA THEORY**

Development media or Development communication refers to a spectrum of communication processes, strategies and principles within the field of international development, aimed at improving the conditions and quality of life of people struggling with underdevelopment and marginalization. Reflective of the field's historical evolution, Development communication is characterized by conceptual flexibility and diversity in the application of communication techniques used to address the problems of development.

Some approaches in the field include: information, dissemination, education, behavior change, social marketing, social mobilization, media advocacy, communication for social change, and participatory communication. Development communication is for the

betterment of the society though raised from a particular group but affect the whole mass for better.

The best source for information in this issue is the report of the UNESCO sponsored international commission for the study of communication problems. According to it, some common conditions of developing countries that limit the potential benefits of other theories here are:

- The absence of communication infrastructure
- Dependence on the developed world for hardware and software
- The commitment of these societies to economic, political and social development as a primary national task
- The developing countries awareness of their similar identity and interest in international politics.

Because of these different conditions, the developing countries overriding objectives would be to use mass media for nation building. In the interest of this task of

national development, the freedom of the media and of journalists needs to be curbed to an extent. The major thrust of development communication theorists has been on the use of media as a support to national development programmes like poverty alleviation, population control, literacy drive, employment generation etc. But the effectiveness of this theory depends on how governments exercise their right to restrict freedom or to intervene in media operations and how they use devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control.

### **DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPANT THEORY**

This is the most recent addition to the list of normative theories; is relevant to the developed liberal societies but has some elements of the development media theory. Mc Quail notes that it is most difficult to formulate this theory 'partly because it lacks full legitimization and incorporation into media institution and partly because some of the other theories'. In his opinion, this theory represents a challenge to the reigning theories and merits separate identification.

The main feature of the democratic participant theory relates to the needs, interests, and aspirations of the active receiver in a political society. It is concerned with the right to information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in the small scale settings of the community.

The theory favors

- ✓ Multiplicity of media
- ✓ Smallness of scale, of operation and
- ✓ Horizontality of communication at all levels. It opposes uniform, centralized, high cost, highly professionalized and state-controlled media.

It is argued that the media should exist primarily for the audiences and not for media organizations and professionals.

## **SUMMARY**

The 'original' four theories of the press/media are: authoritarian theory, libertarian theory, social responsibility theory, and soviet media theory. According to authoritarian theory, the mass media, though not under

the direct control of the State and the ruling classes, must do their bidding. The press and other media are expected to respect authority, to be always subordinate to established power and authority, and therefore should avoid offending the majority or dominant moral, political and economic values. Fredrick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm's go on to explain the libertarian theory, which is also called the free press theory. In contrast to the authoritarian theory, the libertarian view rests on the idea that the individual should be free to publish whatever he or she likes.

Social responsibility consciousness saw several professional associations like the Society of Newspaper Editors, Society of Professional Journalists etc to exercise self-restraint in order to keep up the high standards of journalism. Within the frame work of open and free criticism, professional choice and guidelines for responsible action on the part of members of the press lies the social responsibility theory.

According to Soviet Communist theory, the media must serve positive functions in society relating to



information, education, motivation, and mobilization. They must support progressive movements in the country and abroad. The media according to this theory are subject to the ultimate control of the state and are integrated with other instruments of political life.

Development media or Development communication refers to a spectrum of communication processes, strategies and principles within the field of international development, aimed at improving the conditions and quality of life of people struggling with underdevelopment and marginalization. The main feature of the democratic participant theory relates to the needs, interests, and aspirations of the active receiver in a political society. It is concerned with the right to information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in the small scale settings of the community.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss Social Responsibility Theory in detail
2. Comment the concepts of Authoritarian Theory and Libertarian Theory.
3. Elaborately discuss the four theories of press in detail.