UNIT - 4 : MEDIA SYSTEMS AND THEORIES

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Describe the theories of Mass Communication and their significance for the society
- Explain the various meanings and implications of these theories
- Examine their elements for facilitating a better understanding of the media's impact on the society and vice versa

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units we have learnt the concept of the Mass Communication, mass media and various communication models. In this unit we will learn some theories of Mass Communication.

Theories of Mass Communication make efforts towards understanding the relationship between mass media and the masses, and how they affect and influence each other. It also tries to ascertain how this relationship can

be improved if needed in future. So, a fair understanding of these theories is very important for Mass Communication.

We hope that after going through the various theories laid out in this unit, you will be able to understand the effect of the media on the society much better. But before going into the details of the different theories, let us first understand the importance of theories of Mass Communication.

4.3 COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Communication experts and academic scholars have always been highly interested in studying the relationship between mass media and society because communication is an all-encompassing activity which affects almost every walk of our life. An important factor in this regard is that socio-economic and political developments in any society or nation definitely exerts great influence on the mass media systems prevailing there.

Both these aspects affect each other to a great extent. Mass media is an integral part of any society. It is also an ideal mirror of the society. If anyone likes to know about a society or a nation a detailed study of its mass media would be sufficient enough to afford a clear idea about that society.

Further, depending upon various factors including racial composition, standard of literacy, socio-economic development, political system etc., mass media system of every society shows some unique characteristics.

Knowing about the media systems in the nations around the world will give you a good idea of how media functions in societies in various parts of the world.

In simple terms, media systems are nothing but the general media policies of any nation. You must have already known that mass media has been accorded the status of the fourth pillar of democracy. It is also very powerful as millions of people read or watch it. So, it is important to study media systems in order to understand their influence over the society to which they belong.

Under normal circumstances, mass media is expected to play a constructive role in developing the society as a whole, both of them supporting each other.

Communication experts have developed several theories of mass media over the last more than half century and we can discuss a selected few of them rather than going into each one of them in detail.

4.4 NORMATIVE THEORIES

The Normative Theories of Mass Media explain how the media should operate under the prevailing political and economic circumstances. Every society controls its mass media in accordance with its existing political system, its policies and norms. According to the normative theories, the political system determines the exact relationship between the media and the government. Initially four normative theories were mentioned by Siebert and his colleagues in 1956. These theories were later found to be outdated and too simplistic to be used in present day media research. Later on Dennis McQuail added two more theories to the original set of four. They have been found to be more useful and they contain principles for current media policy and practice. Let us now study all the six theories.

Authoritarian Theory

Authoritarian theory says that the media is subordinate to the state or the ruling authority and thus it is not free to function in an independent and impartial manner. As it is just an extension of the state. Mass media in these nations do not have independence at all and have to abide by the directions of their Government.

There are various types of censorship provisions for the media in these nations which normally forbid adverse criticism of the authorities and non compliance of the official codes. Else, such activities are punishable in different forms.

Autocratic and dictatorial nations are good examples of this type of media system. However, it must also be noted that even in the democratic nations

of the world, freedom of media may be curtailed or cut down in case of declaration of national-level emergency which is only a temporary measure.

In Autocratic system, as long as the media support the ruling Government it is fine. But the moment they start criticizing the Government sharply, trouble will definitely follow them.

In many countries not anyone and everyone is allowed to run mass media organizations even though they might be otherwise qualified and efficient to do so.

This theory basically says that -

- Media is a subordinate entity of the state and therefore must not do anything which may have the potential for undermining the position of the ruling authority,
- Media should avoid such references and news items which may generate dissatisfaction to the dominant political parties, ethnic groups, societies etc.
- Unsolicited offences to majority of the people, or the society as a whole must be avoided and existing moral and social values should be closely adhered to and not to be offended,
- Mass media is not for mass education or instruction. It should always strive for providing only entertainment for the masses. This is to prevent any intellectual development among the people due to the dissemination of information and messages by the media.
- Normally only a few organizations are allowed to set up media establishments so that mass consumption of information can be prevented for the safety of the ruling authorities who would not like to encourage revolt or protests from an informed public against the authorities,
- Judging from these aspects it is quite natural that the media persons and journalists never enjoy any freedom in their expression in the true sense of the term as they can't write or broadcast whatever they like to,

- Everything is fine till the ruling authorities are satisfied and are kept in good humour by the mass media's functions. But trouble begins once media start behaving in their independent manner that may go against the interests of the ruling class or its allies both inside and outside.

Libertarian Theory

Also known as the Free Press theory, this theory advocates that media is absolutely free to perform its duties and responsibilities in any manner deemed suitable and adequate. It is based upon the belief that 'any amount of freedom to an organization or person is also attached with a string of responsibilities in return'. So, to enjoy the given freedom fully, the organization must also mind its own responsibilities corresponding with the freedom granted to it.

This system or the concept which had its origin in Europe, especially Great Britain among the pioneers of the advocacy of freedom of expression and personal freedom, exists mainly in the democratic countries where media is relatively free from any control of the state authorities and can carry out its duties in a responsible way.

For example - the US Constitution very clearly prevents the Congress (the country's Legislature) from making any law at all which might restrict the freedom of expression of the people.

In case of the Indian situation, our Constitution provides elaborate freedom of expression in the Articles 19 to 24 which allow sufficient amount of freedom to mass media.

At a global level the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is an ideal example of how mass media can maintain autonomy and exercise its freedom of expression even though it is funded mainly by the British Government.

On many occasions, when the situation demanded, BBC has maintained high standards by not showing a favourable and partial view of the British government's activities in a crisis or issue.

This theory basically says that -

- The media should be independent of Government control.
- The media should be free to publish anything based on its own judgement.
- Writing against the Government or any political party should not be punishable.
- The media should not face any compulsion to publish anything.
- There should be no restriction of any kind on gathering of information for publication.
- There should be no requirement of license or permit for publication and distribution of news

Social Responsibility Theory

According to this theory, as the media is engaged in a highly serious activity of disseminating news and views to the society with far-reaching consequences, it must maintain a high standard of impartiality as well as professionalism in its functioning.

The professional communicators including journalists should never compromise on the question of truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. They must also develop a strict sense of self-regulatory system to ward off any bias or vested interests towards any party or individual.

In simple terms, the media community must play the role of self-censorship and self-restraint based on personal and social concerns for avoiding news items and programmes which might be harmful for the overall well-being of the society. For example, news items having the potential for causing damage to the society directly or indirectly, should either be avoided or be published in a way that would not cause any such damage.

According to Theodore Peterson, a co-author of the Four Normative Theories of the Press, “freedom carries concomitant obligations, and the press which enjoys a privileged position under our Government (the US Government), is obliged to be responsible to the society for carrying out certain essential functions of Mass Communication in contemporary society.”

On the other hand, critics of the theory feel that 'social responsibility' as a method of self-censorship may deprive the readers or audiences of information which may be potentially beneficial in future.

This theory has its origin in the findings of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press (Hutchins, 1947) of the USA. The Commission found that the media in the free market economy had in reality failed to live up to the expectations of the information and entertainment needs of the society. And so there was a need for looking for an improvement in the situation by the media itself. Or, the Commission felt that the solution to this problem had to come from the media persons themselves and nothing should be imposed on them from outside bodies.

It has led to the setting up of self-regulatory bodies and mechanisms amongst the media community in various forms, such as - drawing up of statutes for protecting editorial and journalistic practices, preparing a universal code of ethics, ensuring implementation of anti-monopoly legislation, regulation of advertising etc.

For example, if you had the opportunity to notice the coverage of the New York Twin Tower blasts in 2001, you would find that there was hardly any photograph of the dead bodies or injured persons in the media. This was a conscious decision of their media not to cause any further panic among the people. This is self-censorship or self-regulation.

In contrast, what do we see in our media? Photographs of violent scenes in newspapers or news channels often greet us in the morning. Such visuals affect us not only with their unpleasantness but may also disturb peace in general.

When the media publishes or airs the news items, photographs, views etc. highlighting the sabotage or other activities of secessionist organizations, terrorists, vandals or anti social elements, it gives a boost to their image and morale. Many people come to know about their functioning and activities and many of them may be influenced. Hence the media has to follow a judicious balance between the types of coverage to be highlighted and those not to be focused.

This theory basically says that —-

- The media should assume some social obligations and responsibilities like setting high professional standards.
- Truth, accuracy, objectivity, authenticity, balance and restraint should be the cornerstones of the media profession.
- The media should exercise self regulation in keeping with the country's laws and social norms.
- All media professionals should be accountable to their society and their organization.

Soviet Communist Theory

The Soviet Communist theory is closely tied to the communist ideology. Siebert traces the roots of this theory back to the 1917 Russian Revolution. The media organizations in this system were not intended to be privately owned and were to serve the interests of the working class.

Mass Communication, according to the Soviet Communist theory, is an instrument of the State. The media do not have an identity of their own. 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 interest. 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 clearest current example of the Soviet media theory is how the media function in China, where TV, Radio, and Newspapers are controlled by the communist Government.

This theory basically says that -

- Media should not be privately owned and should be owned by and be of service to the working class.
- Media should carry out certain responsibilities like education, information, motivation and mobilization.
- The media can be punished by the society for anti-societal publications
- Media should be completely dedicated to the society, fulfilling the wishes and needs of the society and providing a complete and objective view of the society.

Development Media Theory

The Development Media theory says that mass media can be utilized for developing the nation or the society to a great extent. This is because media can help us in extending the information needs of the masses widely to make them wiser in the different activities of life.

In developing nations like ours, one of the most important deficiencies is the lack of 'useful information' for the masses. If a person can gain information, he or she can improve the living standard by applying the information in a wise manner. Now, the media has to play this crucial role of bringing the information to the doorsteps of the people.

In the Third World nations which became free from the colonial powers, a very challenging task immediately after becoming free was to make the masses aware of a modern way of life. This was necessary as the major portion of the population did not enjoy the benefits of a formal educational system and then even today it is still a cause of concern.

Mass media had to take up this responsibility of acting as an 'informal university' for enlightening the masses about all these issues. In other words, mass media is expected to play the role of a disseminator of Government's developmental policies to a big extent.

This can be considered as a 'media activism' by which media takes up the good causes on behalf of the Government or society for delivering the benefits to the masses for whom they are actually meant.

This theory basically says that -

- The media should take up the responsibility of positive development activities in keeping with the established policies.
- The media should uphold national language and culture.
- Media freedom should be restricted to an extent in view of the economic and development priorities of the society and the Government can intervene in media operations in the interest of the country's development.
- Media has freedom, but that has to be used with a sense of responsibility.

Democratic Participant Media Theory

This theory advocates that the needs and aspirations of the masses should be the only concern of the media rather than the interests of their owners.

It mainly means that media should do its best for allowing ever more people from its readership to participate in its functioning. This will ensure that the issues and interests of the masses are adequately reflected in the media.

You may be familiar with a term called 'democratic decentralization' which means more representation of the people or the masses in a specific work, rather than allowing only a few persons to take a decision. This theory is also based on such a consideration – to allow more and more people to have a say in the decisions made by the authorities.

The concept of Participatory Mass Communication has become important over the years. For example – our country has a population of about 105 crore today and about 200 million copies of 62,000 newspapers and journals are published in a year. Now, if a newspaper, a TV or a radio channel has to cater to the requirements of several lakhs of people or target audience we can expect even a quarter of this population to be cared for properly by those channels and newspapers.

In India there are about 1,700 languages and dialects spread across the nation, each possessing a distinct identity of its own. That is why the Union

Government has taken up the policy of promoting and encouraging small-scale mass media like TV or radio centres with a smaller area and target audience. By this, it is expected that more people out of the whole target audience can be catered to properly rather than just a handful of people in a very huge target audience.

The Community Radio that the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (MIB) has been encouraging in the recent years is an ideal example of a device for involving more people in the media.

The MIB has set up five CRs in the north-eastern region at – Williamnagar and Nongstoin (Garo and Khasi, Meghalaya), Mon and Tuensang (Both English, Nagaland), and Saiha (Mizo, Mizoram).

This theory basically says that -

- Media should be controlled by the audience and individual citizens and minority groups should have the right to communicate.
- Organisations and local communities should have their own media.
- Media should be small scale and participative and should cater to the individual needs of the communities.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – A

1. How many normative theories are there? Name them.

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2. Who propounded the normative theories?

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3. Summarise in about 50 words each, what is advocated by the different normative theories.

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4. Which media theory applies best to India?

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ACTIVITY – A

1. Find out at least two countries corresponding to each of the normative media theories.

4.5 MEDIA EFFECT THEORIES

As the name suggests, the media effect theories are the theories that try to explain the kind of role the media plays or what kind of effect or influence it has on the audience. There are several media effect theories. However, here we shall deal with only a few basic ones.

Hypodermic Needle or Bullet Theory

This is an interesting theory as it believes that if the masses are constantly supplied with information repeatedly for hundreds of thousands of times the readers or audiences get affected by it and they start to believe in those information.

Based on the concept developed by Hitler's Publicity Minister Goebbles during the World War II, it believes that masses are passive receivers and as such if they are continuously fed a lot of information by mass media, the people absorb them as well as get influenced by them without much thought.

This is true to a great extent, particularly in the earlier days when the people in general were not much wise and there was non availability of mass media instruments unlike it is nowadays. During that time people used to take for granted, whatever was disseminated.

But, growth of literacy in a big way among the masses and the familiarity of the people with various mass media owing to their widespread availability have made people wise and discriminating enough before accepting any message brought by media as completely true. Mainly due to this factor, this theory is gradually losing its ground.

Uses and Gratification Theory

This theory advocates that the masses use media for gratification of many of their needs or requirements. They accept it provided they find it satisfactory and reject it if it is found to be contrary to their personal beliefs and interests.

In simple terms, it means that though we use media to a great extent in our everyday life yet we do not get influenced by it unless the programmes presented by it match our requirements and personal interests.

There is an influence of the 'Selective Perception' concept in this theory, as, out of so many issues or programmes presented by the media we get influenced only by those which we find are useful to us or some of which might prove useful in future.

Developed by Katz in 1959 it emphasizes that media can not influence someone who does not have any need for it in his life. Besides, it also says that media can be taken as a bridge for satisfying the curiosities of human beings about the societies or the world outside the one in which they live in.

Further, even though we read newspapers, watch TV and listen to radio everyday, we filter out only those contents which we actually need, leaving out the rest that we do not need. Here also we utilize the 'gatekeeping' process and as well as the 'selective perception' processes and accept only those things which we feel are needed by us for satisfying our various requirements. We don't become influenced by those contents which we deem not to be to our liking and requirements.

Agenda Setting Theory

This theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s. According to this theory, mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues.

Agenda setting is now considered to be an important function of the mass media. McCombs and Shaw found the main effect of mass media to be agenda setting when they were studying how political campaigns were covered in the media.

The agenda setting theory says that the media are not always successful in telling us what to think, but they are quite successful in telling us what to think about. It predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will place importance on the same issues.

Say, for instance, in our country, the media gives a lot of importance to cricket. Hockey on the other hand is given comparatively less coverage. As a result, the people of our country are also constantly discussing cricket. They may not know who the captain of the Indian hockey team is, but they certainly know the entire Indian cricket team and also most of the players of other cricket playing nations.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

This theory was propounded by L.A. Festinger in the year 1957. According to this theory people will seek information which would match existing attitudes and views of the world and they reject information that do not conform to existing views. We tend to filter the information that conflicts with what we already believe, in an effort to ignore that information and reinforce our existing beliefs.

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological state that describes the uncomfortable feeling a person experiences when he begins to understand that something he believes to be true is, in fact, not true. It is the perception of incompatibility between two cognitions. By cognition, we mean any element of knowledge, including attitude, emotion, belief, or behavior.

The theory states that contradicting cognitions serves as a driving force that compels the mind to acquire or invent new thoughts or beliefs, or to modify existing beliefs, so as to reduce the amount of dissonance (conflict) between cognitions, thus finding comfort.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – B

1. Match the following:

a. Agenda Setting theory	1. Festinger
b. Cognitive Dissonance theory	2. McCombs & Shaw
c. Bullet theory	3. Katz
d. Uses and gratification theory	4. Goebbles

2. Which theory says that mass media audiences are passive receivers?

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3. Which theory says that people seek out messages which are in tune with their existing opinions?

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4. Which theory suggests that mass media set the agenda for people?

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5. Which theory says that people use mass media for the gratification of their needs?

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ACTIVITY – B

1. Identify instances in your day-to-day lives to which the above mentioned theories can be applied.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

1. Authoritarian theory advocates that mass media is subordinate to the state with no independent identity of its own,
2. The Libertarian theory says that mass media should be absolutely free in its functioning so as to allow a healthy atmosphere of debates and discussions among the people for evolving better things for the society,
3. Social Responsibility theory believes that mass media, especially in a developing nation like ours should exercise a sufficient amount of duties for executing the social responsibilities in different ways rather than leaving it to others for implementation,
4. Soviet Communist media theory believes that the media should serve the working class,
5. Development Media theory says that media must inform the masses who are normally idle about the various developmental activities so that their life can be enriched and propelled towards a meaningful existence,
6. Democratic Participant theory on the other hand advocates facilitating optimum possible participation of the masses in the whole activity of production, broadcasting and publication of mass media contents or programme software. This is expected to facilitate the reflection of local-specific problems of various areas and the people of the country,
7. Agenda-Setting theory says that mass media creates a certain agenda for action and discussions among the people by focusing on various important issues as well as prioritizing them,
8. The Bullet theory implies that media shoots messages or information to the people who in turn accept and absorb them without any resistance and thereby get highly influenced by them,

9. The Uses and Gratification theory advocates that the masses use media for gratification of many of their needs or requirements. They accept it provided they find it satisfactory and reject it if it is found to be contrary to their personal beliefs and interests.
10. The Cognitive Dissonance theory suggests that people will seek information which matches existing attitudes and views of the world and reject information that does not conform to existing views.
11. Mass media plays a crucially important role in creating, mobilizing as well as guiding public opinion whenever needed, to create awareness on any issue which needs to be tackled from time to time,



4.7 FURTHER READINGS

- **Handbook of Journalism and Mass Communication** — *VB Agarwal & VS Gupta, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi*
- **Mass Communication in India** — *KJ Kumar, Jaico Books, Mumbai*
- **Understanding Human Communication** — *Ronald B Adler & George Rodman, Harcourt Brace College publishers*
- **Mass Communication in India**, *JV Vilanilam, Sage Publications, New Delhi*
- **Mass Communication, Theory and Practice**, *Uma Narula, Harchand Publication, New Delhi*



4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS - A

1) There are six normative theories. They are :

a. Authoritarian theory
b. Libertarian theory
c. Social responsibility theory
d. Soviet Communist media theory
e. Development media theory
f. Democratic participant media theory

2) The original set of four normative media theories was propounded by Siebert and his colleagues. Later on, Dennis McQuail added two more normative theories to make it six.

3) **Authoritarian theory:** This normative theory advocates that mass media is subordinate to the state with no independent identity of its own. According to this, media is a machinery of the state and should be used for state propaganda.

Libertarian theory: According to this theory, mass media should be absolutely free in its functioning so as to allow a healthy atmosphere of debates and discussions among the people for evolving better things for the society

Social Responsibility theory: This is a theory which believes that mass media, especially in developing nations like ours, should exercise a sufficient amount of duties for executing the social responsibilities in different ways rather than leaving it to others for implementation.

Soviet Communist media theory: This theory believes that the media should not be privately owned and should serve the working class. Mass Communication, according to the Soviet Communist theory, is an instrument of the state. The media do not have integrity of their own.

Development Media theory: This theory says that media must inform the masses who are normally idle about the various developmental activities so that their life can be enriched and propelled towards a meaningful existence.

Democratic Participant Media theory: This theory advocates facilitating optimum possible participation of the masses in the whole activity of production, broadcasting and publication of mass media contents or programme software. This is expected to facilitate reflection of local-specific problems of various areas and the people of the country.

4) Development media theory.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS - B

1) a – 2
   b – 1
   c – 4
   d – 3

2) Bullet theory

3) Cognitive dissonance theory

4) Agenda setting theory

5) Uses and gratification theory



4.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. What type of a media system is prevailing in India at present? Examine if any of the other theories or systems is relevant for our country's socio-political situation. If yes, why?
2. What do you understand by theories of Mass Communication? Write a few lines about each one of them.
3. What is the concept of Participatory Mass Communication? Write with suitable examples.
4. Explore the role of mass media in creating, mobilizing and guiding public opinion from time to time. Cite suitable examples in support of your answer.

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