



THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY OF MASS MEDIA

Rakesh V. Talikoti

Guest Lecturer , Department of Journalism and Mass
Communication at VijayanagaraSri Krishnadevaraya
University Ballari.



ABSTRACT

The media fails to live up to the marks set up by the pioneers because of stringent laws, monopolistic ownership and sometimes the threat of inhumane. Apart from state constraints serious journalism fails to sustain because of the competitive marketing environment characterized by its shallowness and sensationalism. The same conditions which led to the birth of "Social Responsibility Theory". I discuss the theory of social responsibility in brief along with the situation of its conception, postulates of the theorem. Then the present condition is assessed.

KEYWORDS : shallowness and sensationalism , stringent laws, monopolistic ownership.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Since the 17th century, the media has been instituted as a 4th estate of Democracy along with Parliament; Administrative department and Judiciary. It plays an important role as an informative bridge between governing bodies and general public, in absence of media general public cannot know whereabouts of any Acts, bills or policies and their impacts on society positive and negative. Media has always been considered as the Watchdog of society, despite of its inclination towards sleaziness, sensationalism and superficiality. However, it is still ingrained with channels between governors and the governed; news makers and readers; producers and consumers etc....

The media fails to live up to the marks set up by the pioneers because of stringent laws, monopolistic ownership and sometimes the threat of inhumane. Apart from state constraints serious journalism fails to sustain because of the competitive marketing environment characterized by its shallowness and sensationalism. In many cases rather than being Educative and a critical platform it ends contributing to public cynicism and democratic decay.

Still in many developing democracies, the media has been able to strengthen and deepen a democracy. In a vast democracy like ours, it is of utmost importance that the media functions without any bias and prejudice. In India, media has evolved as a much needed agent of change in society. In any democracy the role of media is heightened during the time of elections. During these times, media helps in forming public opinions which will be in turn beneficiary to them and as well to country.

In a daily life conduct a mass media professional certainly has to ask himself to what extent his actions will affect what percentage of the society that he/she works in. He/she would be aware that his/her first responsibility is towards "Society", second is "Profession", third to "Organization" and at last "Them".

2. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY: BRIEF HISTORY.

Research literature has it that the social responsibility theory was born as a result of problems created by its predecessor, the libertarian theory of the press. This was in the twentieth century. The libertarian theory of the press as the theory that held sway at the time, gave journalists excessive freedom

to publish whatever they like. At the time, political authority rests with the individual. Government's role is to provide the domestic and foreign peace, but the individual is supreme in politics, a belief spelled out in the US Constitution. With these assumptions, Patterson and Wilkins (2005) posit that the theory reflects Milton's concept of the "marketplace of ideas" where anyone could operate a printing press, particularly anyone aligned with a political group. Anyone who ran the presses of the day would provide partisan versions of reality. With time, people started finding faults with the prevailing theory due to factors like the industrial revolution, multimedia society, and growth of intellectualism. By this time, the press was observed to have abused this freedom; it had become irresponsible and the victim of a number of negative practices which culminated in to a negative media operation christened "yellow journalism". This was epitomized by sensationalist practices, irresponsibility and character assassination by the media practitioners. Then there was a clarion call to revisit the libertarian theory. Thus in the 1940s, a group of scholars were commissioned to look into this issue – the Hutchins Commission – funded by the founder of *Time* magazine, Henry Luce. The commission which had no journalist as member, was led by the then-president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins. This commission deliberated for four years before settling in 1947 on five guidelines for a socially responsible press. They first observed that the number of media outlets is limited and that people are often self-interested and sometimes lazy. After reviewing what the real functions of the press to society should be, the Social Responsibility theory was proposed and introduced. They came out with a report they titled "A Free and Responsible Press". The commission listed five goals for the press, including the need for truthful and complete reporting of all sides of an issue. The commission concluded that the American press privileged position in the Constitution means that the press must always work to be responsible to society. The rise of the social responsibility theory also gave rise to journalism professional associations such as the Journalist Association of India (1992).

3. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND POSTULATIONS OF THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY

The underlying principle of the social responsibility theory of the press is that the press should be free to perform the functions which the libertarian theory granted it freedom to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility (Okunna&Omenugha, 2012). If the media fail to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply by way of controlling them. Bittner (1989) has it that the theory held that "a press has the right to criticize government and institutions but also has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society". In the same vein, but in a slightly different angle, Dominick (2009) writes that, "This approach holds that the press has a right to criticize government and other institutions, but it also has a responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society's needs and interests. The press does not have the freedom to do as it pleases; it is obligated to respond to society's requirements..."

The Commission on Freedom of the Press which formulated the Social Responsibility theory while noting that the press does not fulfill her basic societal roles of providing information, enlightenment, serving as watchdog, advertising, entertainment, and self-sufficiency, called on the media to:

- Provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's event in a context which gives them meaning.
- Serve as a forum for exchange of comment and criticism
- Project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society
- Be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
- Provide full access to the day's intelligence.

These goals according to Peterson and Wilkins (2005) were troublesome to journalists who think that these goals are ambiguous and unattainable at the time. How should the forums operate? Whose values should be presented and clarified? How could they provide 'intelligent discourse about the day's

events' in a nightly newscast of less than 23 minutes? And on and on the confusion went. Perhaps this is one weakness inherent in the theory at the earliest stages.

From the foregoing, it is palpable that the fundamental principles of the social responsibility theory could be summarized thus: "be self-regulated, practice responsibly, or the government will control you". In other words, freedom should be exercised with utmost responsibility to societal interest.

4. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY TODAY.

With the spread of modern day democracy, the Social Responsibility theory of media ethics has become the norm now. This theory inspires self-control by the media, for the good of the society. But the question is: how have the media practitioners and journalists held up this theory? How ethical have they proven to be, professionally? A recent research I carried out on sensationalism, social responsibility and media ethics, revealed that today, a century later, the media is seen to be reverting back to the 'bad old days' of practicing freedom devoid of responsibility. The in-thing is now what scholars have come to term "market-driven media" (Yadav, 2011, Kleemans& Hendricks, 2009, Omenugha& Oji, 2008, Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). This commercial journalism gives priority to trivial news items along with certain kinds of layout, headline sizes, photo enhancements, and flashy colors, irrelevant and lurid photos that attract mass audiences like entertainment while downplaying information, all in desperate bid to sell. This may be manifestly due to many pressures from various fronts including the competitive media landscape of this age, businesses, and advertisers as well as modern and selfish motives, social and cultural interests.

In India, where democracy is in its prime, a socially responsible media that knows that public information is necessary not only for citizens to make rational decisions but that it is needed also to spur economic and social development, is an urgent need. As I argued in that research, the norm should never be the right to 'sell' the media itself, the owners themselves, the ideologies they favor, or the people they 'market'. It rather should be the right to 'tell' – telling the public the truth of every event, issue and situation and not allowing any flowering to come in the way. This is social responsibility to the core. Failure of this will result in an inevitable "culture death".

5. CONCLUSION

At the risk of not sounding modest, social responsibility, I observe, should perhaps be the best media theory for media practitioners and journalists. Earlier theories like authoritarianism and libertarian theories of course can no more be wished for the press. The other two – development media and democratic participant theories could be deemed tenable only when a socially responsible media/press is in place. Much more than we might want to agree, ethics is the only thing media professionals have as the guiding principle to keep them sane in the midst of what they face every day. Ethics then cannot be allowed, no matter the cost, to become an unwanted child of business. It's all the media practitioners have got to keep them in line and not rubbish the profession by growing number of interests emerging in this ever changing world. It's already bad enough that we are tagged the watchdogs that no one watches. We must not lose our sense of responsibility because it is what our profession hangs on.

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Guest Lecturer , Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at VijayanagaraSri Krishnadevaraya University Ballari.