THE NORMATIVE THEORIES OF THE PRESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A NEED FOR REVISION

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication is changing media practice, relationships between individuals, media, government and society. In the wake of the increasingly complex media environment, the philosophical assumptions of some normative media theories and the media effects theories require re-examination as new models are needed given the current social realities. A two-round Delphi study design was conducted in South West, Nigeria, between April 2019 and July/ 2019, The design was used to gather experts' opinions of 62 mass communication practitioners in print, broadcast and online media, on the applicability of the normative theories considering the current realities. This work focuses on not only the dominant normative theories but also several other proposals especially with the advancement in technology and growing numbers of citizens journalism. While respondents admitted that the press takes on the political, social and economic coloration of the system of governance as stipulated in the existing theories of the press, they however reiterate the need to extend the philosophical assumptions of some theories such as the libertarian and authoritarian theories due to technology innovation. This paper therefore calls for revisit of normative theories of the media developed over the years by scholars in the United States, United Kingdom, continental Europe and minimally, third world scholars with a new chart for the rethinking process.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Normative Theory, Press, Revisit.

Introduction

Decades past when Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Dennis McQuail, Maxwell McCombs, Shaw Donald, Kurt Lewin and the like conceived and propounded normative theories (authoritarian, social responsibility, Libertarian, Soviet-Union theory, democratic-participant, development media) and some media effects theories (agenda setting, hypodermic needle, gatekeeping), they never envisaged the emergence of the internet, the world wide web, social media and citizens reporters era. Given the changing political institutions, leadership modes worldwide and the peculiarities of the new and social media, there is need to reconsider some of the basic assumptions of some of these earlier theories within the confounding realities of the new and social media era. The essence of this discourse is to look at what the literature is saying about these theories vis a vis what actually operates in the society that is "ideal versus real" norm, to critically assess the relevance of media theories in the post- cold war world. This work focuses on not only the dominant normative

theories but also several other proposals and call for revisit of normative theories of the media developed over the years by scholars in the united states, united kingdom, continental Europe and minimally, third world scholars with a new chart for the rethinking process. Although, revisions done to these theories are either nomenclature change of the original four normative theories (Authoritarian, soviet-union, social responsibility and libertarian), while some others are imagined theories that do not speak to any social realities of nations. In spite of numerous attempts, the original four normative theories still remain dominant in media studies. The starting point is to x-ray the basic propositions of these theories, existing practice/current trend with a view to modifying some of the theories.

A theory serves as a explanation of how things might work in relation to various phenomena. Mass Media do not operate in isolation. This statement is generally agreed upon, and has led to many studies that interrogate the relationship between mass media, society and the government. Initially, it is commonly agreed that the media carry out four basic functions, to inform, to educate, to socialize and to entertain. However, numerous scholars, notably among them, Dennis McQuail, sought to create a more composite study of the press theories, especially in terms of their elucidation on ideas of how media operate within a specific system of social values. McQuail's study demonstrates how the press operated under the various social, economic and political environments. Imhoagene (2015) affirms that the assertion that mass media do not operate in a vacuum led many researchers to study the relationship between mass media, government and the society.

Normative theories are theories that attempt to locate media configuration and performance in the setting (environment) in which they operate, they are reflections of situation within which the press operate. The basic assumption of the normative theory is that, "the press always take on the system and pattern of the social, economic and political structure within which it operate" (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1995) cited by Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2010),

From Two-Four Normative Theories

Although opinions differ on the actual numbers of normative theories, some authors say two and four (Siebert and allies) , some say five, (Merrill & Lowenstein) while McQuail posits that the normative theories are six. The first recognized attempt to explain the linkage between mass media and the political society was in the 16th century when Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956 published a book titled 'Four theories' of the press otherwise known as the Normative theories of the press.

According to Siebert, et al (1956), since the beginning of mass communication, there were only two theories of the media namely authoritarian and libertarian theories centred around government structure, ownership structure and the socio-political dimensions of the society in which the media operates. Later, the theories were sub divided into four. The Four Theories are a direct combination of two sub divisions of the initial press theories based on state systems that is - authoritarian and libertarian. The basis of normative theories of the press is from two opposing viewpoints- "Far-reaching despotism of the state or ruling party" and "Classical Liberalism"

The main notable derivatives of the initial two normative theories are:

- Authoritarian media theory
- Soviet- Communist media theory

⟩ Libertarian media theory and

⟩ Social responsibility media theory.

The Authoritarian media theory dated back to the 16th century. The media existed basically as the mouthpiece of the government of the day. The Authoritarian media theory applies to early pre- democratic practices of society and also to contemporary undemocratic or autocratic military systems. It is still in practice in counties like Libya, Gambia and North Korea. Under the authoritarian theory of the press, all media of communication were under the control of the ruling authority. The theory violated rights of freedom of expression and was entreated under forceful conditions. The press was banned to censure government and its agencies. The mechanisms of control were: hefty taxation, suppressive laws, and control of media employees, embargo on printing materials, shutting of media, killing and imprisonment of journalists under harsh laws. The traces of these controls still exist in the third world countries where press is controlled by oppressive military system (Daramola, 2003) cited by Elebute (2015). Example of this theoretical postulation abounds in African countries like Gambia, Libya, Egypt and Nigeria that have witnessed different colonial, military and autocratic leadership.

The Libertarian media theory: also called the 'free press' has fully developed in the United States of America. Libertarian theory, though applied elsewhere in the world, is the second prototype of the mainstream initial two normative theories as x-rayed by Siebert et al (1956). It is a precise contradiction of the authoritarian theory. The theory asserts total freedom of public expression and of economic operation of the media and discards any intrusion by government in any facet of the press. In other words, it supports free expression, autonomy from any power, freedom from censorship -either internal or external. The liberal standpoint also highlights the need to safeguard the freedom of the media from government intrusion, as well as the ombudsman function of the media concerning those who rule. In relation to the principles of this theory, Nigerian 1999 constitution in section 39 subsection 1 has given room for freedom of expression while the subsection 2 of the same constitution permit the freedom to own, establish and operate any mass media outlet.

Abuse of the freedom from censorship granted to the media and people to publish, own, and operate media outlets in the libertarian theory led to its modification and thus the birth of **Social Responsibility theory**. The theory ideology is in-between both authoritarian theory and libertarian theory because it gives room for media freedom on one hand but with need for external controls on the other hand. The basic assumption of the theory holds that the press must be free but with a responsibility to serve public good whether by way of state regulation or self-censorship. The theory balances the clamour for press freedom with the need for responsibility. It states that in the interest of public interest and true depiction, both sides of an incident should be stated. The social responsibility model is premised on the inkling that media can be free but also have a moral duty to humanity to deliver satisfactory information for people to make informed decisions. In line with the ideology of the social responsibility theory, Nigeria's 1999 constitution in its section 22 of chapter 2 has been fashioned in such a way that press are permitted to censure government and make it answerable to Nigerian people and to defend the objectives of the state. Nevertheless, the constitution did not give the media the authority to try public office holders on the pages of newspapers and magazines, but to monitor and make them accountable to people, (Elebute 2015). Again, regulatory bodies such as National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC) regulate media activities in Nigeria and by way of self-censorship; the

Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), National Union of Journalism (NUJ) were formed to act as censors to unethical practices of media operators

The Soviet-Communist media theory, was prevalent in the old Soviet Union. It is a derivative of the authoritarian media theory. The Soviet Communist theory is seen as an apt application of authoritarian ideas because media are subjected to the interests and functions of the state. In the Soviet Union, the media are directly owned and controlled by the ruling party and as such, reflect the party's socio political position. A good example of this direct state control of the media manifested in section 39 subsection 2 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution. The section states that "ownership of the electronic media: radio and television shall be by special license from the president and staffing shall be controlled by government agents". These types of media stations, within the milieu of dictatorial powers in Nigeria, have been used to achieve the goals of the current leaders although allowances are still given to private investors to own, establish and operate media outlets.

Contributions of Scholars to the Revision of The Normative Theories

From Four to Five- Six Normative Theories

The earliest attempt to revisit the initial four normative theories began in the United States by John Merrill and Ralph Lowestein (1971) who came up with other five typologies similar to Siebert et al's. These were Authoritarian with negative government controls; Social-Centralists with positive government control; Libertarian without any form of government controls and Social-Libertarian with minimal government control (Merrill and Lowenstein 1971, 186.) while the authors added a fifth typology in 1979 named: Social-Authoritarian philosophy with government regulating ownership and operation of the press even though individuals can establish, own and operate media.

In addition, Williams Hachten, also from the United States in 1981 came up with his own revision of the normative theories. Hachten also proposed that the normative theories should be five and not four just as suggested by Merrill and Lowenstein. In his own case, Hachten retained the authoritarian and communist concepts; added two new ones, Revolutionary and Development or Third World theories but combined Libertarian and Social Responsibility variations into what he calls "Western Concept"

Much earlier in the United Kingdom, Raymond Williams in 1962 came up with four modified typologies of the normative theories which are; Authoritarian, Paternal - an authoritarian paradigm with a conscience, Commercial and Democratic paradigms. However, some British Media scholars were not comfortable with the Democratic paradigm hence its fine-tuning to Democratic Media theory.

Notable among the continental Europe scholars whose contribution on the revision of the normative theories has received global recognition if not in practice but in principle is Dennis McQuail. In his initial contribution in 1983, McQuail developed a typology of "Four plus Two" by adding the Democratic- Participant theory and Development Media Theory in addition to the Authoritarian, Soviet Union, Libertarian and Social Responsibility theories. Hence, Dennis McQuail(1984, !987), in his book Mass Communication Theory; An Introduction developed two additional theories to accommodate the loopholes in the four basic theories. They are;

) Development Media Theory

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)   Democratic Participant Press Theory

Development Media Theory

The development media theory propounded by Dennis McQuail (1987) solicits media support for government and its initiatives to bring about socio-economic development. The theory argues that until a country is well established and its social-economic development in progress, media must be helpful. Rather, than antagonizing government, the media should help them in implementing their policies. As the name implies, the theory relates to media in third world nations. With the development Media theory, in the interest of development, the state has the right to intervene in media operations by the use of censorship policies, especially when the activities of the press are not in line with the development objectives of the government.

Democratic Participant Theory

Democratic participant theory ideology resist media profiteering and monopoly while at the same time being against the bureaucracy of public media institutions. The theory stresses the relevance of the receiver in the communication process and incorporates recipient's rights to germane information, to be heard as well as to air and be shown. The philosophy of the democratic participant theory also states that existence of media should be proved in respect of the interests and needs of the receivers and shouldn't be justified in respect of interests and needs of the media entity. McQuail's Development Media theory typology shares same philosophical ideology with United States' Hachten's revision whereas, the Democratic Participant theory is similar to United Kingdom's Raymond Williams' proposed Democratic typology.

Contributing to the debate, Nordenstreng (1997), opine that the normative theories should be continued as cognitive maps for media policy makers and professionals in spite of suggestions that the theories seems obsolete in the current post modern era. Therefore, Nordenstreng proposes five paradigms" Liberal-Individualist paradigm(a derivative of the libertarian perspective where individuals liberty is the corner stone of democracy). Social Responsibility, Critical , Administrative and Cultural Negotiation paradigms. In a way, Nordenstreng's theoretical derivatives apart from Social responsibility appear to be imagined theories as they really do not speak to any social reality.

Methodology

A two-round Delphi study method was conducted in South West, Nigeria, between April 2019 and July 2019. The Delphi method is a research method created in the 1950s by researchers at the RAND Corporation for use in decision making, policy making and to inform direct practices, Brady (2015). Delphi method is a method grounded in the philosophical assumptions of philosopher and educator John Dewey, who believed that social science research should directly relate to and inform real-world practice and decision making (Kirk & Reid, 2002, cited by Brady, 2015). The method was used to gather experts' opinions of mass communication practitioners in print, broadcast and online media on the applicability of the normative theories to contemporary media practice given the current social realities. Media practitioners were purposively chosen as the study population and only those in the editorial division were included in the expert panel. The Delphi method was chosen based on the fact that participants in the study were spread out across different organizations in Ondo, Lagos, Ekiti and Ibadan states, making in-person interviews not cost-effective. Also, the participants

involved in the study were busy professionals who needed flexibility on their participation, for which open ended questions allowed. As such, open ended questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. Seventy participants were asked to answer four open-ended questions in the first round of the study. The question was later reduced to two in the second round of questions. A pre-test of the open-ended questions took place with four media practitioners not included in the overall study to strengthen the responses received from participants. Sixty nine out of the 70 initially recruited media experts participated in the first round of the study, which was qualitative. However, only 62 of the people participated in the second round. The qualitative textual data gathered was analyzed through thematic manual coding. During the coding process, conceptual tags were assigned to data collected to summarize, elucidate and structure recommendation of experts that participated in the study. Inter-coder reliability was ensured among coders. A consensus was reached on the possible revision and these are presented thus:-

Now Joining in the Revision Discourse

The world wide web, internet, new and social media is changing the relationship between individuals, media, government and society. The consensus is that in the wake of the increasingly complex media environment, the philosophical assumptions of some normative media theories and the media effects theories require re-examination as new models are needed given the current realities.

Traditionally, there were two theories and two philosophies of the press-Authoritarian and Libertarian which are enshroud in "State absolutism and Classical liberalism", that is, it is either the government has overwhelming control of the press or the press becomes a "free market place of ideas". Soviet Communist media and Social Responsibility theories are mere modification/derivatives of the two traditional theories and hence, their philosophies. In essence, the original four normative theories are guided by the absolutism and Classical liberalism ideologies.

The two, four, five or six theories typology does not only lack the elasticity needed for proper depiction and analysis of the contemporary media operations, but also it suffers from the ever present western orientation. It is entrenched and founded on western ideology and history not bordering about the individual countries' peculiarities especially Africa that has unstable systems of governance. Most African countries have witnessed colonial, military and autocratic leadership at different times until just recently that democracy is taking its root in the third world nations.

For Authoritarian theory and Soviet Communist theories, there is need to review the philosophical dictates of these theories (absolutism) by mixing it with "classical liberalism" ideology". This is because currently there is no country with absolute state power/control on media. Apart from China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam that still run what is close to Soviet Union, soviet theory does not apply again to most of the world's population. For authoritarian theory, Iran, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea (Asia); Hungary, Russia, Spain (Europe): Mexico (North America): Argentina, Brazil, Chile (South America) and Egypt, Libya (Africa) are examples of the counties that operate with the authoritarian ideology. Nonetheless, given the digital age and current realities, none of these countries practice solely either authoritarian theory or Soviet Union theories; it is with some measure of liberalism. In China that is a Communist society for instance, there are still radical investigative journalists shaping public opinions.

Besides, even in liberal societies like the United States and the United Kingdom that are run by "Classical Liberalism"- Libertarian principles still have some degree of authoritarianism to curtail abuses and rising surge of fake news, hate speech and anarchical society that could be spurred by unchecked flow of information. No country can function well under the libertarian paradigm without experiencing state of anarchy in form of fake news, hate speech, damaging propaganda and so on.

Every country has its own political dispensation and that mode of leadership dictates how the media operates. Most of the countries have a mix of the theories. None of the theories are solely fully in operation in any country. The idea that democracy means freedom is untrue. To a great extent, nearly all democratic countries have some authoritarian leanings as there are no completely libertarian society. This explains why some democratic countries are operating under authoritarian-liberal rule. In practice, it is usually a combination of two or more like authoritarian-libertarian, Soviet-communist-social responsibility. MCquail (1987) notes that the theories were formulated in extremely general terms whereas actual media institutions and practices in most countries display a mixture of several paradigms: Libertarian, responsibility and Authoritarian and so on.

Press freedom emanates from the constitution of a country, this is apart from the code of ethics that the media developed by themselves. Again, there is question of what is forbidden to be published. There is no country that the government of the land would not intervene in media operations to specify rules of acceptable practice clearly spelt out in the constitution whether such a country/state is driven by authoritarian, soviet union, social responsibility or libertarian theory. However, the agitation of the citizens on fundamental human rights, freedom of expression shapes how government allow the media to operate. In liberal societies like the United States, United kingdom where there is high regard for fundamental human rights and freedom of the media, government still go tough on erring journalists and media organizations.

Going down memory lane, Imhoagene (2015) notes that the Nigerian media had always put on the form and coloration of the society. That is, the press system from time immemorial has been a function of the type of government or political system in place. Colonial Nigeria operated a colonial Press system; the Nationalist era was a time when we had activism in indigenous press system. As time went on, with the coming of radio in the 1930s, the British colonial government simply operated a propagandist press that relayed information from the colonial masters in Britain. After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the Press became somewhat libertarian until 1966 when the military took over power. The Press couldn't operate freely because the military government sought controlled it.

Today, the Nigerian Press system is a range of some of the normative theories of the Press. To a large extent, the political system dictates the media theory in operation and so in Nigeria, the libertarian and social responsibility normative theories are the dominant theories that shapes media practice and ownership.

The above notwithstanding, with the social media, other possibilities of media usage have emerged given birth to citizens' reporters and uncensored gamut of fake and real information in the media especially online. Again, one can see some subliminal operations of the developmental media and democratic participant media theory especially in the establishment of community radio for developmental purposes.

Need To Revisit the Normative Theories Given the Birth of New Media and Current Social Realities

The internet, World Wide Web and social networking sites have redefined journalism practice and its touch points. Now with the internet, a smart mobile phone or computer, the concept of citizen journalism, news aggregators, online publishers and bloggers is gaining more popularity whereby anybody can publish news and information with the click of a button. The debate about the eventual implementation of freedom of information bill in Nigeria will even open new frontiers for freedom of expression in the country.

Furthermore, ownership structure affects applicable theory in a media organization. A government owned establishment for instance is an organ and mouth piece of government. Also, some partisan political private media owners may also be autocratic in their content at the expense of social responsibility theory. For instance, during the 2015 presidential election, Africa Independent Television and some other newspapers were vocally partisan in favour of the ruling party then, Peoples Democratic Party.

Again, going by the democratic-participant media theory's philosophical ideology, enshrined in classical liberalism paradigm through the machineries of new and social media, agenda setting and status conferral are no longer the exclusive role of the traditional media. Now, ordinary and popular social media users/ influencers are setting agenda for public discourse about government activities, public office holders and other members of the society. Examples abound in Nigeria and other neighbouring countries. In Nigeria for instance, the story of "the slapping senator": Senator Elisha Abbo of the Federal Republic of Nigeria who slapped a nursing mother in May, 2019 during an argument started on the social media before the mainstream media took up the story and elaborated it for the prosecution of the senator. Another example is the rise to stardom of Olajumoke Orisaguna in 2016; a bread hawker in Lagos state who walked past a photo shoot and was later posted online by Toyin Sokefun Bello better known as T;Y. Bello. Her story went viral, became topic of discussion, and caught the attention of the low and mighty including the conventional media and even the corporate world. In fact, the social media conferred celebrity status on Orisagunna almost spontaneously, thus challenging the status conferral function of the conventional media, another exclusive role of the traditional mass media. Also, the coordination of the #endsars protest was done largely on social networking sites

With libertarian theory which talks about free market place of ideas, it is high time that the social responsibility theory be incorporated into libertarian theory to curtail abuses in form of fake news, disinformation, hate speech, misinformation, propaganda etc. A journalist should be responsible for whatever he or she writes irrespective of the channel of communication whether offline or online. Senate members of the 8th Assembly in Nigeria in 2018 attempted to propose an enabling law to guide the operations of cyber journalists and social media users. Although, this generated a lot of Fuss, we still believe this should be revisited to regulate digital/cyber journalism and redefine the "free market place of ideas characteristically of online/social media to avoid anarchy.

Therefore, we propose that there should a balance between free press and a media with checks and balances. When people have the right to write under the classical liberalism paradigm, there must also be responsibility attached in light of social responsibility to regulate media activities. Same should therefore apply to social media users, bloggers and citizens' reporters and all online content producers.

Building upon the various revisions and proposals for normative theories particularly from the point of view of their relevance to the current social realities in the third world nation, contemporary world and findings from this study, we propose the following:

> ➢ Libertarian-social responsibility theory: Exceptional features of the new media setting, including the transition from mass communication to de-massified and network communication, and the emphasis on interconnectivity and interactivity is aiding the change of the media content consumers/users into a media producers. Now, media audience has moved from mere consumer of media contents to producers of media narratives which is why we now have the concept of 'prosumer'. There should be balance between free press and a press with checks and balances even in the classical liberalism ideology. Independent content producers should enjoy their freedom to establish, own and operate media but with accruing responsibility. Therefore, with the increasing numbers of citizens reporters, online publishers, Bloggers, Podcast, Vloggers made possible by internet, the social media, the media and content producers whether offline or online should be responsible/ accountable to whatever information they disseminate , the government and the society. The press should not serve as an opposition to the government or as checks to the government alone but should also support the government to bring about development and improvements in the society. McQuails's Democratic participant theory is enshroud in the libertarian ideology and so should be enshroud in this new proposition.

> ➢ Authoritarian-libertarian: This is a blend of state control with free market place of ideas, with state censorship through the enactment of various enabling laws that will not jeopardize press freedom in terms of media ownership, operation and practice.

> ➢ Soviet union- Libertarian-Social responsibility theory: For countries that still practice communist system of governance such as North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba and China.

> ➢ The original typology of Siebert et al , modified by Merrill & Lowenstein, Hatchen and as stretched by McQuail, is designed around one ''basic'' opposition; that is - development media theory. The Soviet- Communist theory, for example, is an drawn-out from of the authoritarian theory. The Social Responsibility and the Democratic Participation theories are merely developed Libertarian models of communication theories. We are only left with the development media theory which is contemporary and still being debated. The sources of this controversy are bound up with the colonial ideology of naming countries as developed, developing and under developed countries. In this regard, the role of the media and the credibility of the development media theory is distraught by the failure of the so called third world countries to develop culturally, economically socially and politically in spite of the application of the theory (Ostini & Fung, 2002). It is therefore apt to say that the development media theory may be jettison because it fails to fit into any notable socio-cultural realities of media and the society.

Conclusion

While the proposed typologies offer some possible possibilities, we do not present it as a substitute to the Four Normative theories. This is only to open other lines of discourse for the way people particularly content

producers and professional communicators should speak, think and distribute content to members of the society bearing in mind the needed checks involved in free press whether by way of state regulation or self censorship.

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