Chapter two

Theories of Media Systems

In this chapter I look into the concepts of media systems that have been formulated by media theorists while analyzing media systems around the world. The idea of media systems was for the first time forwarded by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their classic text *Four Theories of the Press* published in 1956. Their typology of press included other media like radio, television and films. This typology has come under immense scrutiny and has been revised by many scholars from time to time. For the sake of my research I look into such other models that have been forwarded and try to understand the relation between media and society.

2.1 Media Ownership and Control

With the advent of parliamentary politics around the world, the press aligned itself gradually with the political parties. The control of press is seen to have merely shifted from state control to control by politicians. With changing economic environment, the ownership and control of the press gradually passed over to owner-entrepreneurs. This was maybe because the parties could not bear the rising cost of running newspapers. The press needed to be self-supporting in order to survive (Boyce, 1987; Curran, 1991; Curran and Seaton, 1991). Advertising as such rose in prominence and wielded much power; the repercussions being that the press would be run as commercial enterprise only.
The new entrepreneurial class of owners of the press tried to use it as an independent source of power with which to challenge reigning centers of power and their policies. The press barons wielded this power because they commanded the opinion of their readers who were huge in number. At times they played the roles of kingmakers; they successfully brought down governments and crowned leaders of their choice. Some of the press owners ran their organizations as commercial enterprises in order that they may use them principally for ideological ends (Boyce, 1987; Negrine, 1989).

However, in the normal run of events the press could not function as an independent locus of political power, in an extremely complex equation that involved politics, money and power. The nature of political situations, more than the press itself, determined the kind of influence wielded. The accusation of unheeded power and economic clout was also alleged against the press. It becomes clear that the press depended to a large extent on a close relationship with the ruling elite, which gave it the source of money, power and ultimately legitimacy. As such the relationship could be said to have been symbiotic, with political class also depending on the press to disseminate their agenda, the real power rested with the constitutionally elected leaders (Boyce, 1987: 109).

The rapidly changing economic scenario altered the structure of press ownership in major ways. As the press became expensive to run, advertising emerged as a major source of revenue. The advertisers too, as they wanted to reach a wider audience, discouraged the press to patronize the political leanings of owner-entrepreneurs. It also became more economically productive to run the media as private companies with ownership being shared among many stockholders. A more decentralized ownership pattern took away the locus of power from one individual and made it into a more complex structure. Control practically shifted to the professionals, who ran the daily affairs at the ground level.
Marxist scholars are of the view that the cost of opening media enterprises, market entry costs, are so high that only the capitalist class can venture into it. Even then, this class too depends on other sources of capital so that the media organizations can get started. This actually supports the presumption that it is those with diverse connections with other successful sectors of the economy that can start new media (Murdock, 1982).

The Marxist theorists argue that effective ownership in terms of controlling the power centers of these organizations still remains in the hands of a few capitalists, although the structures might have changed considerably in favour of multiple share holders. The resulting scenario is one where a few capitalists control the most important sectors of the economy including the media industries (Murdock, 1982).

As new technologies emerge, it has increasingly become clear that media professionals can be laid off as they are made redundant. The advent of new media technologies has not helped in the promise of diversity of ownership or enhanced access to the media for the people. In fact, on the contrary, it is the control by owners that is seen to have been strengthened (Boyce, 1987; Murdock, 1982).

Even though advertising, from a liberal perspective, seems to have freed the press from political control, it introduced its own set of complications and control. Theorists argue that advertisers are part of the commercial and capital spectrum within which the media itself operates, and their relation to media is a result of that complex relation. The influence of market forces on media is:

In general the needs of production, limitations of cost, and concern for audiences, produce news in which the world is portrayed as fragmented and unchanging, and in which dissent and opposition appear ephemeral, peripheral or irrational. News become palliative and comforting,
intentionally undisturbing and unthreatening, focusing on institutions of consensus maintenance and the handling of social order...In seeking to maximize this market, products must draw from the most widely legitimated central values while rejecting the dissenting voice or the incompatible objection to the ruling myth (Murdock and Golding, 1977: 40).

Advertising has immense ideological implications. It creates a dream world and therefore masks and distorts real relationships of power and dominance (Negrine, 1989: 80). As Murdock and Golding (1977:37) argue:

…the voices which survive will largely belong to those least likely to challenge the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Conversely, those most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicize their dissent or opposition because they cannot command the resources needed for effective communication to a broad audience.

It is clear that ownership of media organizations has implications for control and use. It can also be said that this control certainly impacts on media performance. But the idea is whether or not ownership the only determining factor. The problem of arguably single source of power is compounded by the fact that the idea of media is generic and does not always refer to a single idea or organization. There have been innumerable empirical study but it is not easy to prove that a causal relationship between media ownership and media control indeed exists, or for that matter between media ownership and media performance. Such relationships are normally complex and the contours of such relationship hardly discernible. In the words of Gallagher (1982: 170-171):

The complex of constraints... within which communication organizations and professionals operate, makes it difficult to sustain a view of the media and media practitioners as autonomous ‘watch-dogs’.
On the other hand, to the extent that the media can be observed to negotiate the parameters of constraint—exercising at least at times, a policy of ‘brinksmanship’—they cannot be dismissed as subservient ‘tools of government’. Rather, the general conclusion must be that mass communication is indeed bound with, and bounded by, the interiors of the dominant institutions of society, but that these interests are continually redefined through a process to which the media themselves contribute.

A general proposition that to some extent, individual or private ownership of the media is biased in support of capital interests and their ideologies is not out of order. That content is largely dependent on the access of market forces to such organizations and their economy is also obvious. In such a scenario where not all news gets equal weightage due to the overriding factors of market interests and its relation to media organizations, influence of profit seeking motives, it can be argued that media cannot be seen to foster a truly democratic political process (Negrine, 1988).

2.2 Models of Broadcasting

2.2.1 Commercial Model

This version of the media model equates the interests of the public with the financial security of the industry under regulation (Avery and Stavitsky, 2000: 53). The profitability and commercial interests of the media companies serving the “audience-as-market” (Ang, 1991) is a marker of the viable use of the media license.

The first step in this kind of marketplace approach to broadcast regulation, then, is to not to focus on broadcasters as fiduciaries of the
public…but as marketplace competitors (Fowler and Brenner, 1982: 3-4). In fact, Couldry defines the rise of the commercial model as a result of “market populism... which claims markets as the privileged site of popular voice” (2010: 12).

It is a given that media are important in the constitution of modern societies, both developed and developing, both historically and epistemologically. They are of strategic importance in countries such as India if important messages are to reach a widely dispersed population in a large geographical area in a short span of time. This double function as transmitters of information as well as interpreters of social phenomenon is related to the theorization of the media as message carriers. Thus media is also theorized as a system of symbolic manifestations.

The media are part of the modern economic systems; they need to be invested in order that they may continue to operate in a profit or loss making environment. Profit making thus becomes the source of sustenance and revenue from advertisements or state subsidy the lifeline of such organizations. Another possibility is a combination of both in varying degrees. This economic or commercial dimension constitutes media organization as material systems (see Murdock, 1991). As part of an ever increasing economy thus selling pressure becomes the sole criteria of judging content of media. They prefer programmes that entertain the audience and sustain their buying mood (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 17).

The symbolic and economic aspects of media and the importance of this in the context of media especially in relation to democratic process has been an area of study for communication theorists and researchers (Bennett, 1982; Boyce, 1987; Curran, 1982; 1991a; Golding and Murdock, 1991; McQuail, 1987).
The power of the media lies in the fact that they can reach a wide section of the masses which would be impossible through any other means and thus they are regarded as a source of power for those who know and wield them. This belief rests on the argument that whoever has control over the media has access to the public and can therefore use the media as a means of controlling their political beliefs and agenda. Therefore the belief, that in the field of politics it becomes very important who owns the media.

2.2.2 Guardianship Model

The guardianship model is characterized by its impetus to produce enlightened and informed viewers. It is an emulation of the ideals of social liberals like John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, who argued that the “public needed education, leadership, socialization” (Artz, 2000: 5).

The guardianship model sees the “audience-as-public” (Ang, 1991: 28). This model does not emphasize on the participation of citizens. The guardianship model can be defined as an “aid-without-development...creates dependencies” on these enlightened public intellectuals capable of guiding the public (Artz, 2000: 6). The guardianship model can also be argued to be identical to the “informed citizen model” (Avery and Stavitsky, 2000: 57) that frames the public in need of defined targeted selected information so that they might turn into better citizens in a democracy. This model is a top down approach which takes a position of knowledge to be given to the masses. It takes the public to be uninformed and who are in need of guidance and support. The guardianship model was one of the initial ideas for the public service broadcasters to transmit programmes for social upliftment especially in the developing and the under-developed economies.
2.2.3 Technology Model

The technology model argues that technology is not the guaranteed path to achieve the goals of media reform. Media reform theorists resist the idea that the internet or other such modern communication systems system is going to democratize media production. Or for that matter the distribution system itself and bring about the ideal situation of dethroning the existing media system and its controllers. Every new technology has promised the ideals of democratization finally reaching the media sector, and each networked communication system becomes prey to the existing media ownership structure. Cable television was first promised as breaking the monopoly, providing space for public interest broadcasters and commercial interests alike. As Wu (2010) notes, what tends to result is each emergent communication system being colonized by commercial companies. Thus it becomes irrelevant that the internet, as a technology, as an inexpensive system, has made media reform issues irrelevant and inconsequential. Media reformers argue against the idea that the infinite “long tail” (Anderson, 2006) of shelf space provided by the internet (new technology) has created a new world in which state regulation are unnecessary. Powerful forces soon transform ideal democratized communication systems (new technology) into commercial entities that bear profits. Technologies tend to be only innovations where public funding is necessary if the ideal situation for the public sphere is to be met on any present or future networked communications systems (McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

2.3 Four theories of the Press

Siebert, Schramm and Peterson (1956) argued for a philosophical identity as the basis of differentiation between different press systems that they
Theorized. And these philosophical and political rationales they deemed were the important markers of the press systems around the world. The rise of mass communication as a distinct discipline has give rise to only two to four theories of the press depending on the definitional approaches. The argument is that the Soviet Communist Theory is a reworked version of the still obsolete Authoritarian theory of the Press and again the Social Responsibility is an advancement of the Libertarian Theory. Siebert et al. have treated the theoretical formulations in a different manner based on the argument that the Soviets had produced a system different from earlier authoritarianism which is so important to contemporary society, and also because the Social Responsibility theory had charted the apparent direction of development which the Anglo-American press was seen to be taking (1956: 1-6).

*Four Theories of the Press* (1956) was accepted by global scholars when McQuail (1987:111) categorized them among six normative media theories. According to McQuail:

> The first attempt at a comparative statement of major theories of the press dates from 1956 (Siebert et al.) and it remains the major source and point of reference for work of this kind. The four-fold division by Siebert et al. has been retained, although supplemented by two further types, in recognition of more recent developments in thinking, if not in practice. It may be that the original ‘four theories’ are still adequate for classifying national systems, but as the original authors were aware, it can often be that actual media systems exhibit alternative, even inconsistent, philosophical principles. It thus appropriated to add further theories to the original set.

Since 1956, numerous media thinkers (Curran, 1991a; McQuail, 1991; Skogerbo, 1991) have subjected Siebert et al.’s Four Theories to criticism. The criticism arises out of the fact that they are closely linked to the liberal pluralist approach. Taking the American system as the only
model of democracy and the ultimate choice also comes for criticism. The idolization of the American system thus can be seen in itself to be an inkling of fundamental biases within that society.

A major weakness as analyzed from the perspective of media theorist is the overwhelming argument applied in *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) for their typology of the defined press systems; the dependence on the idea of absolute freedom from the control by the state of press systems. This differentiation is mainly questioned on the idea of the assumption of the control over the media by states through direct or indirect means, rather than contrary to the idea of press freedom itself. Only the ‘Social Responsibility’ theory, among the lot is not distinguished along this argument. This theory was formulated as a result of Siebert *et al.* arguments of developments within the press organizations, but was later changed due to the pressure of heavy criticism that was faced by this argument of Libertarian theory. The emphasis placed on freedom in the libertarian context is merely extended to include obligations as well, in the social-responsibility framework. (Skogerbo, 1991: 143)

Denis McQuail (1987: 109-134), in the classic text *Mass Communication Theory* used the word normative theories which he used to refer to the theoretical formulations forwarded by Siebert *et al.* And he added two more theories, the Development Media Theory and Democratic-Participant Theory to the original four that were there. Among other sources and basic postulates, McQuail gives importance particularly to McBride Commission report (1980) prepared by Unesco as an argument for the postulation of the Development Media Theory. The pretext for this theoretical assumption as forwarded by UNESCO is its importance to the developing and under developed world and over all for Third world communication given the inapplicability of the four theories.
The special needs of the third world societies form the argument for McQuail. He calls for a different orientation that is needed to serve the interests of these special needs of the developing and under developed societies, and he talks of a normative theoretical argument that indeed serves that purpose. However, critics argue most of these normative assumptions have been talked of in the theories forwarded in *Four Theories of the Press*. As put by Skogerbo (1991: 144-146), in this theory, achieving the development goal is given overriding importance to the extent that its success is seen to justify the abridgement of other human rights and freedoms, especially press freedom. Press freedom has been overlooked in this theory, which becomes a major flaw in the arguments of McQuail as he himself argues for the ideals of democratic communication as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

McQuail (1991) indeed argues for against the four theories in light of changing media scenario and a far more complex relation between media and their environment:

The confusion over the status of and possible application of normative theory has been made worse by their: high level generality; their lack of direct connection with actual media systems …In many, if not most countries, the media do not constitute any single ‘system’, but are composed of many separate overlapping, often theoretically inconsistent elements. For instance, values of independence and impartiality can be pursued with equal chance of success (or lack of it) by systems based either on principles of the free market or under strict public control…(pg. 69).

In spite of the inherent contradictions and weaknesses, the *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) provides for a typology that is important and has undergone constant modification in answer to the criticism leveled against it from time to time. In the process it becomes the initiator for the
further development of ideas to accommodate the understanding of media systems through the lens of normative media theories. The argument being normative theories are useful in measuring out performances of the media and also providing for a definitive scale to measure such performance with the normative tools available.

The normative theories forwarded in the typology presented in *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) can be recasted according to the changing socio-economic and political situations that arise from time to time. Normative theoretical arguments are universal and certainly suited to the media systems of most countries, though with local variations and reformulations. Critical normative analysis can be variously put to use to uncover power structures and dominant systems of oppression.

### 2.3.1 Development Support Communication

There are different concerns that have emanated in the arguments of the development theory, concerns that have resulted from developments in the field of diffusion of innovation to other more pertinent concerns. The dawn of the realization that other constraints which are mostly socio-economic in nature have resulted in the search for a more suitable option to look into the needs of the developing world that would in effect take all these limitations into consideration. These realizations led to the rise of development communication (Melkote, 1991; Servaes, 1995). This particular tradition has an instrumentalist take on the way media can be used for development. Emphasizing to be able to jump the gap of knowledge that is the domain of area experts in health and agriculture and other such fields and be able to communicate the knowledge to ‘the people who are in need of such knowledge and its specific applications to
improve their performance, increase their productivity, improve their health, etc.’ (Melkote, 1991: 29).

2.3.2 Controlled Media for Development

Controlled media for development is somewhat similar to the earlier theory the only point of differentiation lie in the fact that it advocates for all round socio-economic upliftment of the society. The Third world depend heavily on the developed world for technology, some specialized skills and cheap, but expensive to produce cultural products (McQuail 1987: 119-121).

In this version of development media theory, societal interests have found preference over individual development. The moot point in this theory being that media should act as the harbinger of good and positive news, and focus on the developmental activities of the government rather than being judgmental or critical about it. Government ownership and control then becomes the norm and twisting the media or even suppressing it is justification enough for the sake of informing the people about its plans and programmes. Governments all across especially in the developing world have deemed media to be only another arm of governance like any other and the sole purpose of it should be to act in public service like normal government agencies. Governments in such societies also hide behind the argument that people need authentic sources of information, not that which misleads. Especially since the illiteracy is quite high and political consciousness low the governments argue for a single ownership of media, held by the government which will enable its goal of development that much more easier. (Mytton, 1983; Ziegler and Asante, 1992).
It can be further added that such kind of political systems always avoid the existence of an active press in the fear that such an act would lead to the emergence of counter political forces and dissident views which might ultimately lead to the instability of the notion of the state itself. Opposition to the state’s views and counter political forces might take advantage of the illiterate and ignorant masses, which is pre-conceived notion of this theory, and exploit this ignorance to destabilize the state. In most of the developing and the underdeveloped countries the existence of a political system is quite fragile to really withstand the views and arguments that goes against it, and might also be seen as attempts to question the powers that rule those states. Thus the argument that media has to act in consonance with the diktats of the state and stop short of scrutinizing the affairs of such government.

McQuail (1987: 121) argues, ‘in the interest of development ends, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict, media operations, and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified.’ Arguments such as these have been used over the years to explain and legitimize the use of media in authoritarian systems. Development has acted as a normative camouflage for the aspirations for dictatorial states and their agendas across the world.

The third idea of development media theory forms the basis of the research in this study. Freedom of expression is of utmost importance in the ideals of this theory and it is theoretically closer to the notion of public sphere. And interactivity and audience discussion and participation at the grassroots level is an important way to achieve this goal of development and also strategizing alternative routes for emancipation. Importantly unlike the earlier model it gives due importance on the essence of upkeep of human rights which forms the basis of the freedom of expression, and the role of the press as the watchdog of societal norms and the democratic order is emphasized (Ansah, 1988). Democratic ideals
as human development objectives become the core ideals for such a system.

Therefore this public sphere model of development can be said to have risen contrary to the ideas of dictatorial inclinations that find encouragement in the name of development. Rogers (1976) argued for the very same participatory process of social change where the stakeholders have a say and control in the way that they can use their resources environment for the benefit of the majority of the society, which essentially means greater equality and freedom in the hands of the people. The earlier version was the easy way of arguing for the taking over of the rights of the people and access to free press, and a fear of criticism that was justified by control by the state.

As is already clear from the arguments, the preferred idea of development also lays emphasis on the socio-economic aspect of development, but more importantly, the fact that development cannot take place without the free participation and willingness of the people for whom development is intended in the first place. It emphasizes on participation in the decision making arena. Therefore it can be presumed, that meaningful participation cannot be achieved in the absence of a society that lets one have right to express oneself freely and frankly. The importance of media of mass communication has to be emphasized here, is its ability to provide for such an environment which allows for democratic participation and interaction among the masses. Media in a democratic set up which wants to progress, should be a conduit and provider of social and universal discussing space and also be an avenue to argue and debate and reach democratically discussed conclusions. Simply put, media’s role for the democratization of ideas is foremost, and in this respect it has to provide for a space which becomes the discussing platform for the formation of an active public sphere, the essential element to equitable development in society.
Essentially what this model argues is to look at the context of development from the angle of the participation of media in this role. For the sake of such an analysis, it is pertinent that media is autonomous and outside the purview of government control and political pressures. Journalists in such a society have to understand their role as the harbinger of hope to the people, they need to understand the effects and repercussion of such development to the hopes of the local people, the difference between an ideal scheme and its actual implementation, and the difference between reality and ground situation and its impact on people as claimed by government officials (Aggarwala, 1979: 181). This observation stems from the belief that social and political criticism of any state institution and for that matter any government should not be seen as, necessarily disruptive.

2.4 Public Sphere

One can argue that there are two main directions in which media’s functions can be thought of. First media functions may result from an objective and empirical observation of media activity (see Curran, 1991; McQuail, 1987, 1991; Skogerbo, 1991). These functions are then used to describe what role the media plays in relation to what it does or accomplishes. In this functionalist perspective, institutionalized activities of the media are taken to as serving the needs of the particular society to which it belongs.

Secondly, media functions defined as mainly as normative ideal-types can be seen as a particular society’s expectations and hopes and conditions for media performance. These are variously defined by theorists in their formulations of normative functions for the media (Ansah, 1988; Curran, 1991; Siebert et al. 1956; McQuail 1987, 1991;
These normative functions may also form the basis and standards based on which to appraise media performance. According to McQuail (1991: 70), a normative framework is the underlying backbone because it is laid by a fundamental assumption that the media do serve the ‘public interest’ or ‘general welfare’. This means that the mass media are different from other business or industry, but carry out tasks which are of benefit to a wider section of the society, especially in the cultural and political life.

It is in the first sense above that Habermas related to the role of the press as an ideal democratic discussion space. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1986) points out that the ideals of capitalism that grew in eighteenth century Britain as a result of the free market economy that led to the rise of liberal ideals of democracy. The availability to the bourgeoisie the resources for the creation of institutions such as newspapers, debating societies, libraries, coffee houses, publishing enterprises and literary societies, universities and museums, and other such public system of institutions which became democratic pillars in the true spirit, that political awakening and public opinion, could be formed. The bourgeois developed their own voice, and Habermas says they thereby began to develop into a critical audience (Peters, 1993: 552). Access to private spaces of the elite ruling class, which were the domain of the limited, was opened to the ordinary people, who were hitherto restricted to participate, and access to them was almost free due to the rising influence of capitalism, costs were no longer prohibitive for commoners too, the public sphere thus, grew tremendously in size and influence.

*Structural Transformation* has recently been widely criticized and reformulated with change in the political economy of the media (Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 1991; Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1992; Keane, 1991a; Schudson, 1992) with the argument that the newspapers which were
crucial to Habermas’ conceptualization were tools of propaganda for the bourgeoisie and the middle class rather than the embodiment of rationality that was disinterested and they were challenged by other competing newspapers and periodicals which vouched to be the real voice of the class of people who were actually excluded from the process of political rights. Curran argues that eighteenth century press as pointed out by Habermas was not as emancipatory as it looked. It was marred by infighting, corruption, and extreme ideological fights marked their existence all throughout the century- something which was far removed from the idealized portrayal of the eighteenth-century press by Habermas which according to him was the embodiment of ideal discourse of private individuals. Thomas Murphy (2005) contends that Habermas's formulation of the concept of the public sphere was intended from the beginning to be controversial (pg. 164).

Another observation on the Habermasian concept made by Curran (1991a) all throughout the eighteenth to the twentieth century press has in reality never been free, it has always been under some or the other kind of political control from vested interests which have always understood the importance of press to political processes. This contradicts the situation as explained by Habermas his theorization of the early press which he postulated as the rational thought process of the bourgeoisie and an ongoing platform of discussion for the private citizens of the state, and the contradiction with the press at later times as an agency of manipulation, dictated by the intent of collective politics. He argues that the characterization is misleading in case of the contemporary media as an agency of manipulation and is not in consonance with the realities of the press in eighteenth century. Since Habermas stresses a deliberative, not merely informed public, this in consequence may be a less valid criticism of Habermas than of the current media practices (Haas, 2004: 80).
Craig Calhoun (1992) has pointed out that Habermas is too taken up by the ideals of the liberal bourgeoisie and their formulation that the public sphere is only a space to which citizens converge and form opinion on matters, and thus in the process neglecting the idea of political movements, social unrests and uprisings. Calhoun says social movements are actually important for a democratic space to flourish as it brings to the centre issues which are of importance to public discourse. Habermas is also clearly interested in the public sphere as different from “representational” publicity. He considered the public presence of kings, lords, and the ruling class to represent a public that was highly inaccessible to the masses, and barred the public from participation in the government and thus not public at all. Although they could do more than “gaze stupidly on the spectacle of the Lords and Kings,” they had no practical access to public life (Peters, 1993: 547). Nancy Fraser (1992) brings in the idea of women being excluded from the public space and thus pushing the issue of gender into the private space. For her, Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is an exclusionary space which has historically been a masculine form of the public sphere, excluding in the process minorities such as gays, lesbians and people of colour.

2.4.1 Public Sphere Model

The public sphere model posits the public as co-participants in the production of media texts and equal owners of the media resource. “One of the most useful things about the concept of the public sphere is the explicit place it gives to media and modes of communication as central to political life in all varieties” (Peters, 2003: 1). The public sphere model refuses to see the public as mere consumers of media products, or as public waiting to passively receive information from the top; rather, in the public sphere model, the public are active as users and producers of
media. The public sphere model demands active participation from the public and is also potentially rewarding for the public and for individuals. The public sphere model is also the most constrained and limited by the dominant market logic of neoliberalism and capitalism. As Habermas says the rational, open discursive practices and discussion of the time created the perfect conditions for the public sphere to operate and function as thought, and the media contributed to this open discussion of ideas by encouraging free dissemination and criticism of opinions and ideas.

Therefore this approach to broadcasting is characterized by ideas such as participatory culture, citizen journalism, dialogic engagement amongst communities or social movements, and social or community ownership of the means of media production and distribution. These efforts are an attempt to make consumers into citizens and return the idea of public discourse as a corporate analogy from the public relations managers to those who really own them—citizens. The public sphere model values dialogue and negotiation in the self-governance of society (McCauley et al., 2000: xxiv).

As we discovered in a number of instances in which organizations attempt to “seed” a public, where such compromises are more prevalent than anomalous (Fish et al., 2011). These compromises become even more evident and stark through ethnographic and historical analysis of commercial media organizations experimenting with the idea of public sphere model.

2.4.2 Press as Political Public Sphere

All criticism granted, the importance of public sphere cannot be discounted as a legitimate source of media analysis. According to
Garnham (1992), criticism hurled at the theory has a basis as well and have historically been the basis for further refinement of the concept according to changing times. Elsewhere, Garnham (1990) has argued that the original theory can be used to be a historical measurement against which to judge present day social arrangements and the Habermasian principle represents an ideal situation which can be strived to be emulated. Mouffe (1992) says any idea of a public sphere must take into account the large number of opposing voices present in oppositional discourse, and the complexity of the resulting power structure...these conflicts are not contrary to working democracy, but rather, they are central to the current understanding of political participation (pg. 757).

Schudson (1992: 147) argues that theory forwarded by Habermas acts not so much as the measurement of change rather acts as a category to understand the importance of political critique, ‘…offers nevertheless a powerful and arresting vision of the role of media in a democratic society, and in this sense its historical status is irrelevant.’ Habermas himself has argued, to be workable under the contemporary societal situation public sphere is achievable only when it is exercised under a reoriented social and political order where it is under the control of organizations that are politically opposed to each other and are committed to the idea of protecting the public sphere both in society and in their relation to each other (Garnham, 1990). According to Dahlgren (1991: 2)

The concept of the public sphere can be used in a very general and common sense manner, as, for example, a synonym for the processes of public opinion or for the news media themselves. In its more ambitious guise, as it was developed by Juergen Habermas, the public sphere should be understood as an analytical category, a conceptual device which, while pointing to a specific social phenomenon can also aid us in analyzing and researching the phenomenon. …As an analytical category, the bourgeois public sphere consists of a dynamic nexus which links a variety of actors, factors and contexts together in a cohesive theoretical
framework. It is this configurational quality, with its emphasis on institutional and discursive contingencies which give the concept its analytical power.

*Structural Transformation* received immense criticism and in response to some of those, Habermas (1992: 451) now focuses on the idea of the *political public sphere* as an important means for democratic theory. He deliberates on the notion of the formation of the constitutionally ratified political will of the people or rather electoral democracy which is aided by a media that is uncorrupted by the influence of power, which he formulates as ‘deliberative democracy’ and is a theoretical reality for Habermas in a constitutionally safeguarded electoral process. And this process leads to the formation of a public sphere which tends to depend on the process of problem solving rather than decision making.

Habermas argues that this theorization of the *political public sphere* is the ultimate form of public representation and fulfils all aspirations of the public that are under it, the media too on its part fulfills all the conditions that it is supposed to, as a space which becomes the platform for the formation of ideas and opinions for the masses who are the citizen of that particular state. Thus this theory forms the definitive base for the functions of a democratic state. The existence of the *political public sphere* requires the constitutional safeguards that the nation state provides. Habermas says ‘it also needs the supportive spirit of cultural traditions and patterns of socialization, of the political culture, of a populace accustomed to freedom’ (1992: 453). In summary, the main characteristics of the theory of the public sphere, and media’s role in it, as Curran (1991b: 83) says:

> From (Habermas’s) work can be extrapolated a model of a public sphere as a neutral zone where access to relevant information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free from
domination by the state and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis. Within this public sphere, people collectively determine through the process of rational argument the way in which they want to see society develop, and this shapes in turn the conduct of government policy. The media facilitates this process by providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstructing private citizens as public body in the form of public opinion.

2.5 Liberal Democratic Tradition and Role of the Press

In its original conceptualization by Habermas, the public sphere theory is strongly based on the liberal-democratic theory though striving to go beyond it. As Dahlgren (1991: 3) puts it: “…one could see that with its emphasis on democracy and the role of the media, Habermas’s notion of the public sphere actually has a good deal in common with prevailing liberal thought in Anglo-American traditions. At the same time, the concept has ambition beyond those developed within the traditions of liberal democratic theory, of which his analysis also in part presents itself as a critique.”

Liberal democratic theory describes a political process whereby the various groups, and individuals, of society articulate their opinions and views in terms of demands on societal properties, the formulation of common significant goals and active participation in policy formulation for the achievement of these legitimate demands and goals. A precondition to this argument is the essential presence of western society imitated political institutions; importantly, universal suffrage, parliamentary democracies and multiple political parties. The success of these institutions in such ideal situations is mainly seen as the source of political legitimacy. This type of constitutional legitimacy implies that
power lies with the masses, a power exercised through the power of suffrage.

For any government to be considered truly democratic, therefore, it must be a national government chosen by a democratic polity on the basis of a constitutionally backed elections; that is where legitimacy in exercising power and in execution of leadership is mediated through the power of the ballot-box by a fully enfranchised universal suffrage, and where the articulation of political thoughts occur through a multi-party democracy which reflects the true plural character of such a social order.

There is a basic socio-theoretical argument about media and about politics and the relation between the two. The concern is based on particular assumptions about the social and economic systems within which the media functions. The literature cited shows that media have become an integral part of a network of institutions in society and they are largely responsible to provide meaning to the relationships between such institutions in a political system. Because of their resultant economic bias, media have become embedded in the political system that it inhabits so much so it is hard to differentiate the two and political activity becomes integral to media systems and vice versa. This is important in understanding the idea of opinion formation, the propagation of dominant ideologies, and political legitimacy.

It is obvious that the notion of a press that is intrinsically involved in the democratic process has roots in the liberal democratic theory. From a communication perspective, liberal democratic theory (Keane 1991, McQuail, 1987, 1991; Skogerbo, 1991) puts at premium the idea of supremacy of the individual, the belief in logic, progress and the unflinching sovereignty of the popular opinion. This theory postulates freedom for the individual in both the symbolic and the material realm; the freedom to hold and express opinion and ideas through the press
without risking persecution and to willfully own and use means of publication without curbs or interference from government. The normative aspect of liberal-democratic theory posits a centrifugal role for the press in the democratic political process. It says that mass media should play a pivotal part in making the relevant information and ideas and views and ideals publicly available and in providing the spaces in which such argument and policy proposals can be debated and discussed, so people can make informed choices in their capacity as citizens (McQuail, 1987; 1992; Murdock 1991; Curran, 1991a).

Press freedom in the liberal democratic tradition harps on private ownership and free market principles. Among functions, the free press should: be a kind of relater of dissent or political opposition, be a citizen’s first wall of defence against probable misrule, and a means of arriving at the common truth. The argument is that free public expression of all competing ideas is the means to see the truth and the only means to avert falsities. “The nearest approximation to truth will emerge from the competitive exposure of alternative viewpoints and progress for society will depend on the choice of ‘right’ over ‘wrong solutions” (McQuail, 1987: 113; Siebert et al. 1956).

The historical rise of media in the west as a medium of mass communication was met with opposition and hostility among the ruling elite (Curran and Seaton, 1991; McQuail, 1991; Negrine, 1989: 50). Regulation of the press was exercised upon the grounds that too much freedom of the press was a threat and destabilizing influence on the security and even existence of the state. Also, the media were seen as a potential new threat to the established power order of the day. Thus any plea for freedom of the press was practically arguments against these controls.
Freedom of the press from state control was presumably closely linked to the development of and spread of parliamentary politics. This was further linked to the demise of the empire and colonies of the western states and growing opposition to the authoritarian rule. Freedom of expression for the public meant freedom from state control, which implied freedom to express a political choice and resultantly make that choice. The idea of the fourth estate was suspiciously viewed as the need to curb the excesses of the power of the authoritarian state. The modern ideas were envisaged, a press which was a watchdog, a keeper of the conscience of the government and also taking governments to task and representing the public interest. But this role of the press is never without its limitations.

2.6 Democracy Model

The democracy model in its agenda states that democracies should promote democracy inducing practices like investigative journalism and revelation of facts to the public which are deemed important to the cause of the society. This clearly means that the purpose of the state should be to manage media resources importantly for the promotion and upkeep of democracy. This directly would mean an emphasis on the public sphere and guardianship models and a minimum influence of the impact of the commercial model of media. Moving over the public resource model and inclusive of the technology model, the democracy model argues that the democratic state should advocate for pro-democracy practices.

Has nothing to do with scarcity of resources or an abundance of technology. It is much more fundamental than that. The founders of public service broadcasting...said that democracy needs a healthy nonprofit, non-commercial media sector. That’s the core issue involved here. You can’t have a democracy without having a healthy, democratic
media system. ... That scarcity stuff was something lawyers and politicians cooked up later, to sell public broadcasting to legislators, judges, and bureaucrats. You can’t get people off their butts on the scarcity thing. You organize a movement on the vision of democratic media, not all this talk about gigabytes in the spectrum (McChesney, 2003: 16).

Only a radical democratization of the media systems will bring about appropriate and helpful mediated public deliberation that does as Habermas suggested it should: fill the space between civil society and the state (Haas, 2004: 181).

2.6.1 Democratic Press and its Economic Limitations

The strongest theoretical arguments about the limitations of the role of the media in the democratic process and in democratic institutions are rooted in Marxism. According to Fiske (1987: 254):

Marxist assumptions ... start form the belief that meaning and the making of them (which together constitute culture) are indivisibly linked to the social structure and can only be explained in terms of that structure and its history. Correlatively, the social structure is held in place by, among other forces, the meanings that culture produces...

On the basis of such ideas and arguments, classical Marxist perspectives dwell on ownership issues of the means of material production held by the capitalist class and the thus unequal distribution of wealth and property in society. The capital centric industrial order is seen as having produced a class divided society where a group of bourgeois minority class hold power. Following Marx, it is argued that the ruling class which controlled the material means of production also held sway over the means of psychological production and distribution, including
Thus, the ideas of the ruling class are the overwhelming dominant ideas of the epoch. This is the postulation that was articulated by Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology*:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has the control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. …The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think… hence among other things (that they) rule also as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (1998: 136-137).

From this theoretical assumption, private ownership of the media of mass communication belongs to the capitalist class. Because of their own personal and commercial capitalist interests, they are supposed to by default to use their power and control to ensure that, the media they own and so blatantly wield influence on carry dominant ideological messages in the interests of the ruling capitalist class. A more subtle and refined view of economic determinism argues that the communication industries taken together bolster the general interests of the capitalist class, or of dominant factions within it (Murdock, 1982: 141). Other thinkers of the Frankfurt school make a contribution in detail by giving reasons for the failure of revolutionary upheaval; resulting in the overthrow of capitalism as theorized and predicted by Karl Marx. Market forces in collusion with the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944), which in the process of reinventing culture for sale defeats its basic oppositional purpose, is ostensibly blamed for this failure. The media which acts as a vehicle for culture, ends up being just a mechanism for containment of change, a
function which twisted the fundamental economic revolution that was predicted by Marx.

The political process itself is mode of struggles for power and dominance. At another level Marxist thinkers argue that a ruling class will always ensure that information dissemination and ideological bias legitimize their hold on power. In liberal democratic theories, however, this power is with the electorate through the ballot box. Media today based on these arguments can be said to use media as tool for political campaign and propagator of ideologies and beliefs.

The media is seen therefore as pivotal in preserving the status quo in that as the carrier of the ruling dominant class ideology that celebrated ‘technological rationality, consumerism, short term gratification, and the myth of ‘classlessness” (McQuail, 1987: 65), it has served to perpetuate and elevate the economic base by subjugating and assimilating the proletariat class. The commercialized and homogenous mass culture was the chief source of legitimacy through which this success for monopoly capital had been achieved. Politics, therefore naturally from the above arguments, as mediated by media content is serving the preserve of the capitalist class.

For the public to be part of the democratic process, they must necessarily depend on the media for information and commentary. Again, for politicians it is the media that disseminates their divergent views to the wider mass. Thus, media becomes a potential site of conflict and an arena for political struggle. Those who have power and access to the media may want to have their views given biased treatment and those of their opponents constricted. A more used approach is to present ideologically slanted messages as if they were objective reality, propaganda in the garb of reality.
In complex situations and in modern day structures ownership does not always translate directly into control, nor where control always also determines the nature of the content, structural analysis becomes important to understand the complex relationship between the two as put by Marxist political economists:

Analysis at this level is focused not on the interests and activities of capitalists, but on the structure of the capitalist economy and its underlying dynamics... it does not matter who the key owners and controllers are. What is important is their location in the general economic system and the constraints and limits that it imposes on their range of feasible options (Murdock, 1982: 127).

As Hall argues how media institutions although under a dominant ideology still functions with free conscience of its own and the options it has that ‘could’ be used to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production of dominant ideologies, while at the same time being ‘free’ of direct compulsion, and ‘independent’ of any direct attempt by the powerful to gobble it’ (1982: 86).

2.7 Pluralist Determination of Press Performance

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, pluralists dwell on the declining influence and control of the dominant capitalist class and of ownership as a seed source of power. In this school of thought, significant and effective control over the tools of production is believed to have passed over to those who directly commanded and wielded the necessary novel technologies and organizations. Murdock (1982: 128-135) provides a summary of this approach. From this perspective, it is believed that it was the salaried professional class of the new world order who were seen to emerge as the new power group. This development was seen as a result
of the rise of large share holding companies. Legal ownership of such new world order organization was seen as a result, to have divided among a large group of shareholders. These new shareholder class who held the control of the company in a complex mix of divided ownership tended to be ‘absentee owners’ leaving the task of supervising day to day running to professional managers specifically hired for the purpose (Murdock, 1982: 130).

The media industry was very much affected by this sudden change in trajectory in industrial organization. Newspaper ownership became less concentrated and it spread to a large number of shareholders and scale of newspaper organization increased tremendously with increase in readers. As these changes came into effect, more and more owners-proprietor who controlled organizations gave up their control over operations to full time editors and managers. Thus, all powerful owners once, are seen as having been now relegated to people who merely become the means by which the editors and managers exercise their power and gain legitimacy too. With such a change in the structure managerialists have stressed the relative impotence of owners and their autonomy of administrative and professional personnel (Murdock, 1982: 128).

Alongside such kind of editorship view of shared responsibility is a pluralist conception of power. According to Murdock (1982: 129):

Where Marxists insist that the capitalist class is still the most significant power bloc within advanced capitalism, pluralists regard it as one elite among a number of others composed of leading personnel from the key institutional spheres-parliamentary, the military, the civil service, and so on. These elites are seen as engaged in a constant competition to extend their influence and advance their interests, and although some may have an edge at particular times or in particular situations, none has a permanent advantage. Hence, instead of seeing the effective owners of the communication corporations as pursuing the interests of the
dominant capitalist class…. pluralists see the controllers of the various cultural industries as relatively autonomous power blocs competing with other significant blocs in society, including the financial and industrial elites.

This pluralist notion of power structure in a press organization rises from the economic idea of laissez-faire or liberal market model of the modern economy. As postulated by Murdock, just as there is the race for power and control between institutional entities, so media organizations have to compete for the holy grail of their existence i.e. attention and loyalty of the audience in the market. In the ultimate analysis it is the demands and concerns of the consumers or audience that determines the quality of products that such organization finally supply to the market. Similarly, the managers and editors are not all powerful as thought to be; their actions and decisions are subject to scrutiny of the market forces or so to say the consumers that they cater to.

As is obvious from the preceding arguments liberal theorist abhor the idea of government or state ownership of any kind of media. Even state patronage of media institutions and tools is discouraged because it is believed to be the starting point of government and official domination. It is arguably opined that private ownership of the commercial model kind of the media is the only sure guarantee in ideal circumstances of freedom of the press and of free expression for the people. It follows then the idea that private citizen of the state who so wishes is free to own the media like any other business interests and use it to express private political view one holds. The success or failure of such an enterprise would entirely depend on the ability to produce a profit making organization like other businesses do and this in turn will be justified by the editors’ ability to cater to the demands of the consumers. Logically speaking, citizenry would be the final judges of what type of media existed (Siebert et al., 1956).
From such an argument perspective, the political and media scene is seen as a market place of ideas. All views should be given the opportunity to compete in it (Curran 1991b; Habermas, 1989; Negrine, 1989; Siebert et al., 1956). The public or the audience will choose the idea that is closer to their idea and belief cultivated again through the dissemination of views from media itself. They would identify with and express themselves by buying the media, which carried what to them constituted the idea of truth or closely resembled that idea. Advertisers too would be attracted by the concept of the media that receives public legitimacy and acceptable to the widest audience possible which in turn would mean wider publicity for their products.

2.8 Ideology, Class and Hegemony

The concept of ideology, according to Larrain (1983) has metamorphosed to the level that it has lost out on most of its original and critical meaning. He observes that in its original form by Karl Marx, ideology is both that process and end product, by purely discursive means, of providing answers to life’s real issues and contradictions. The ideological forms of consciousness as said by Marx conceal the existence and character of these inbuilt contradictions, which are naturally seen to be inherent in capitalist social formations. These misrepresentations as he calls it or ideological distortions lead to the creation of the same conditions of oppression. Marx used ideology as a means of both criticism of capitalism and also nature of its distorting element. It can be inferred therefore that ideology according to Marx’s formulation is a narrow conceptualization that applies to those distortions of reality which are related to the masking of a contradictory or distorted reality.
The neutral versions of the concept of ideology slowly came to replace the Marxian original negative connotation. Gradually what became the standard accepted conceptualization was the interpretation of ideology as an all encompassing superstructural sphere in which men acquire consciousness of their contradictory social relations (Gramsci, 1971: 138).

According to Larrain (1983: 222) it came from Lenin’s further elaboration of the concept of ideology. He observes that:

For Lenin, ideology becomes the political consciousness linked to the interests of various classes and, in particular the opposition between bourgeois and socialist ideology… Ideology is no longer a necessary distortion which conceals contradictions but becomes a neutral concept referring to the political consciousness of classes, including the proletarian class.

With Gramsci, the above conceptualization of Lenin on ideology became a realm of struggle for hegemonic control. Gramsci (1971: 377) considers ideology as being much more than a system of ideas, it refers also to a capacity to inspire attitudes and provide directions for action. Ideology plays role of ‘the terrain in which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.’ It is through ideology only that a class can exercise hegemony over others.

Althusser (2008) points out that ‘the reproduction of the submission to the ruling ideology’ requires the formation and presence of stable institutions like that of the Church, the mass media and the political institutions. He calls these institutions, whether or not they are strictly organized by the state, ‘ideological state apparatuses’. Because the world of ideologies is not simple but complex structures and comprises simply not of dominant ideas but of a field of ideological themes, Althusser says what the ideological state apparatuses create must be the ruling ideology
exactly inverse in its proposition. Ideological reproduction thus becomes’ not only the stake but also the site of class struggle…” (Hall, 1977: 336).

The idea of struggle for hegemony is used to explain the phenomena how the ruling class or dominant groups propagate their interests in a subtle way projecting their ideas as the prevailing, common sense view (White, 1992). According to Gramsci, in modern times, a class or social group maintains its ideological dominance not simply because it uses force which is barely exercised but because it also exerts an intellectual leadership and makes compromises, with a variety of allies who are unified in a social bloc (Sassoon, 983: 201-203). The exercise of hegemony thus depends on a combination of force and consent (Hall, 1977: 332).

**2.9 Political Economy**

From the arguments laid out in this chapter it is clear that media systems have developed according to change in the structure of economic and political institutions. The ideal situation hardly exists and all media systems have led towards the commercial model of media systems. Other models which were answers to the need of Third world countries like the Development model have also been appropriated in the new economic order. In the political economy of media world the production of media products is focused toward the making of profit.

Audiences historically have been deemed to be passive consumers who have to be fed with information that suit their purpose and development needs. The public service institutions are a case in point where such experiments were undertaken. In case of such public broadcasters, the-audience-as-public model defines audiences as a needy mass that require the services of public television programmes in order to
improve their living conditions, where information was treated as the prerogative of the government. Political economy is concerned with the functions of production, distribution, and consumption of the products of television stations and how these are associated with audiences’ vis-à-vis their need for survival in social life (Mosco, 1996: 17).

In the public service ethos, media houses are already suffused with an assumption of knowing all than [the audience] what they [want] or [need] (Scannell, 1996: 11). [Television, hence its audiences] are not just constructs; they are invisible fictions produced in the studio rooms of television stations who decide what is that needs to be produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of the mechanisms of their own survival (Hartley, 1989: 227).

Political economy exclaims that other discourses of power as well, also relating to the socio-cultural which are also at play in the moments of the audiences’ interaction with television messages (Mosco, 1996). When these other ‘powerful discourses momentarily sideline the exertion of power over the audience by the ideologically circumscribed television content, then aberrant readings of programmes’ happen (Fiske, 1987).

Thus, in this chapter I have looked at the existing arguments on how media systems have formulated and re-formulated their messages according to changing times. In the context of my study these theoretical lens will be used to look at the empirical data on the state of media in Assam. Assam is a state with a lot of media activity; print media has existed in Assam since mid-nineteenth century, and has played an important role in the formation of the contours of the Assamese nation. The Assamese language has seen immense change because of the influence of print media which actually, was in turn the result of the first printing press’ arrival in Sivasagar, Assam. In the next chapter I look at
this historic turn in events and the role of Assamese press in the modern Assamese history.