Chapter II
Mass Media and Society

Introduction:

The sharing of information has always been an integral and unavoidable part of any social organization. Especially in the propagation of political and religious awareness, the element of mass circulation of ideas was present since the early times. However, by the early middle ages, the European church had already set up detailed and successful methods to ensure dissemination of its messages to one and all.

As the mass media is an indispensable part of the economic and political structure of any society, it is presumed that the people controlling or owning the media can influence the society to a larger extent. The informative details, images and ideas circulated by the media form the crucial aspects of our culture. Besides, there is a considerable body of theory that views culture dependent on the economic and power structure of a society. There is always a continuous interaction between mass media and society, which results in both being influenced by one another. The French Sociologist Gabriel Tarde, (1900) envisaged a constant interweaving of influences: “technological developments made newspapers possible, newspapers promote the formation of broader publics, and they, by broadening the loyalties of their members, create an extensive network of overlapping and shifting groupings” (McQuail 81).

The media shapes our identities and attitudes by educating us, socializing us, entertaining us, selling information to us and especially by indoctrinating us. It seems to have taken on an increasingly authoritative role in the society. In this regard Karl Marx, in his Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (1964) explains that our consciousness is social. According to him, life i.e. our social existence, shapes our consciousness. This means that since the media plays such a large role in our lives, it helps in shaping our consciousness.
Raymond Williams, in his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977), explains the process through which the ruling class influences and shapes the consciousness of the common people. He uses the word “hegemony” and talks about the ideological domination, which extends throughout a society and is more broad-ranging than the ideology based on class. He differentiates between rule, which has a political aspect and eventually based on force and hegemonial ideological domination, which makes people incapable of finding out what shapes their ideas and overall thought process. Besides, this domination also helps in maintaining the status quo and solidifying the role played by the ruling elite in the society.

Marshall McLuhan(1964) adopted a different approach and carried out a classification of media according to whether it was “cool” or “hot”. According to him, the medium was more important that the textual content carried by the medium. He contended this by stating the well-known aphorism: “The medium is the message”. The mass media undoubtedly has an important influence on the content it circulates but the opinion put forward by Marshall McLuhan that the medium plays a basic role in the communication process as it changes our modes of perception and sense ratios has failed to gain acceptance. As per his theory, “cool media” have low definition, because they have little data and high audience participation. According to him, “hot media” have high definition and by this he means that they are full of data that lead to the participation of low audience. He further states that newspapers belong to the category of “hot media” whereas for print that has linearity, logic, rationality, connectedness and individuality unlike electronic media that is described as “all-at-once-ness.” So, a change in the popularity of a medium leads to other important changes in society, changes that ultimately have an impact on individuals, as we are all social beings (Berger 32-33).

McLuhan makes an important point in Understanding Media (1964) by stating that electronic mediums of communication, namely, the computer, telephone, television, radio and the telegraph were mainly responsible for reshaping civilizations in the 20th century. In contrast with the print-age man who saw one thing at a time in successive sequences, the contemporary man gets to experience multiple forces of communication at the same time, by using more than one of his senses. To prove his argument, he draws
a distinction between the way we go through a newspaper and read a book. With a newspaper, most of us do not just go through a story and after finishing it start another. Instead, we prefer to run our eyes across the pages, absorbing different headlines, sub- headlines, lead paragraphs, photographs and advertisements. “People don't actually read newspapers,” McLuhan says; “they get into them every morning like a hot bath” (McLuhan Interview from Playboy 1).

The mass media of the modern era performs three key roles:

1. Interpretation of collected information
2. Close observation of the environment/society
3. Recommendations for conduct and transference of heritage.

Among all these three functions performed by the media, close observation of the environment refers to the publishing and broadcasting by the mass media about the latest news or happenings in our society and the world at large. The news is just like language; it is a map that we need to read or interpret in an active way. Though a news singles out, organizes, creates and ultimately shapes an event it is up to the reader to choose what interests him and make his own analysis of the news.

Jurgen Habermas (1962), the German philosopher of the Frankfurt school, has stressed on the pivotal role played by the reader in the construction of news. He enunciated a model that was named as ‘bourgeois public sphere’ by him. According to him, the early public sphere was made up of organs of information along with mediums of political debate such as journals and newspapers and meeting halls, political clubs, Parliaments, coffee houses and literary salons, which were the popular institutions of political discussion of that time. A great deal of socio political discussion took place in these institutions and similar other public spaces. Habermas studied the developments that occurred in Germany, France and Britain in the late 18th and 19th centuries and formed his definition of the ‘bourgeois public sphere’. However, Douglas Kellner states that this public sphere for and of the middle class has facilitated the forming of public opinion that opposed the power of the state and the powerful interests that were coming to use their influence and shape the bourgeois society. This is Douglas Kellner’s explanation, for the first time in history, regarding how groups and people can
be instrumental in shaping public opinion and yielding an effect on the political practice by expressing their interests and needs in a straightforward manner.

As an influential socializing agent, the mass media plays a big role in the contemporary society. People watching the television and other media products also learn and adopt the norms, beliefs and values published in or broadcasted through them. By the time an average American student graduates from high school, s/he has spent more time in front of the television than in the classroom (Croteau and Haynes 17). The sociological importance of media lies far beyond the content of media messages. Their effect is not restricted to what we are aware of. From a sociological viewpoint, the media performs a vital part in each and every aspect of daily life.

The influence of the media can also be seen in the way we acquire knowledge about the world we live in and form interactions with other fellow human beings. Hence the mass media has a powerful impact on social relations. Besides being dependent on media, our relations with the political world is also influenced by the mass media`s connection to the world of politics. The effect of the media on our social relations is noticeable to our eyes when we closely observe the ways in which it intervenes and facilitates our relationships with numerous social institutions. For instance, our knowledge of the Government mostly depends on news instead of experience.

Well-known American sociologist C Wright Mills (1959) once stated that it was “sociological imagination”, a term that he coined, that enabled us to observe the connections between “public issues” and “private troubles.” His statement one of the most famous expressions of the sociological perspective. According to this viewpoint, it is possible to understand the situation of a person only by positioning that individual in the broader context of the society.

In the contemporary world, the media often functions as the connection between the private lives of people and their relation to the public world. That is to say, it is mass media that educates people about the place they occupy in the broader society.

In the transition to postmodernity, the mass media has become the determiner of what is good and not good for the individual and the society at large. As an institution,
it has changed from within our cultural milieu. The media is especially important to social and political establishments, namely, the school, the church, the family and the state. It is the fourth pillar of democracy and functions as the guardian and the conscience keeper of the society. In today’s world, the social role played by the mass media has expanded and it has emerged as a provider of career choices to students, health education, fashion tips and many more. But the attempt by the media to set ethical norms or standards of behaviour has been a problem and not a solution. This is what Charles Wright (1959,1960) terms “a dysfunction of mass communication.” (http://mediamagazine.in/content/dysfunctions-media, accessed on 4 May 2017)

By publishing or broadcasting advertisements, the media may influence the shopping preferences of consumers and through film content, it is likely to have an effect on the morals of viewers or divert their attention from significantly vital matters. Apart from that, the mass media may impact events of national importance by taking sides with politicians and political parties. For instance, during election campaigns, the front-page headlines published in newspapers may influence the voting behaviour of the common man. The media has pervaded the contemporary society in such a way that it may be thought of as an integral part of cultural and other social institutions. This changed perception of the importance of mass media does not signify that the motives for which people use media or the traditional questions regarding effects of interceded messages on public opinion are not relevant any more. It therefore indicates that the significance of media in the modern culture and society can no longer be disconnected from the varied functions of society.

The media ushers in changes in societal functions and is also altered by the same. The institutions of the society intercede in a range of issues and this results in socialization becoming central together with dissemination of information and sharing between media and society. The term “socialization” describes the procedure through which people, individually and jointly learn, accept and internalize the prevalent cultural values, beliefs and rules of a society. The passing of information through a medium or channel leads of its translation from sensory experience into a group of unique symbols. As symbols are selective, they most of the times act as filters by favouring some facets of the of the thing being represented at the expense of others.
Differences between the terms “Information” and “Communication”

In present-day media and cultural studies, the words “information” and “communication” are perhaps the most loosely defined terms. Even though the contemporary period is known as “Communication Age”, “Information age” and most recently the “Networking Age”, there are differences between Information and Communication; they are not experiences or concepts that are alike. Information is comprised of verbal and non-verbal messages and is basically unilinear. However, Communication is not just the sending or receiving of information. Instead, it is an experience built on human relationship. Noteworthy information can lead to the formation of a communication relationship but if the exchange of information takes place on a commercial or unequal basis then information becomes a commodity.

Ricardo C. Noseda, a renowned Argentinian scholar, differentiates between communication and information as: “Communication is not an act but a process by which individuality enters into mental cooperation with another individuality until they come to constitute a common conscience. Information, instead, is just a unilateral translation of a message from an emitter to a receiver (Kumar 7). Therefore, communication involves a shared symbolic environment as well as a social relationship among the participants. Thus, through communication, social interaction takes place and this facilitates a sense of community. Communication can also be seen as an exercise of power relations, the power of an individual over a group or another individual, and also the power exercised by the owners of mass media and producers over media audiences. This viewpoint is based on Marxism which observes class differences and conflict instead of consensus as the role of communication. This perspective emphasizes the inequality among people who are a part of a communication experience, especially the disparity in caste, class, social and economic power.

The early twentieth century was an age of relocation to cities and migration across frontiers and in the popular democracy and industrial societies of this age, mass communication was a relatively new social phenomenon. It was also a period of conflict between repressive forces and those that worked towards social change and of fight
between nation states and empires. The mass media was an organized means of open communication and many people took part in this communication while remaining at a distance and in a short space of time. They were born into the context and conflicts of this age of transition and have continued to be deeply implicated in the trends and changes of society and culture as experienced at the personal level as well as that of society and the world system.

Mass Media, Technology and Print Capitalism:

Technology enables mass media to reach out to a larger audience by functioning as its driving force and producing the largest outcome related to the circulation and distribution of information. Technological tools mediate messages and facilitate communication. Therefore, the role played by these tools as a catalyst is obvious. In a digital world, technology lies at the heart of media organization. Wilbur Schramm (1960) states that the term “mass medium” is essentially a working group with some organized device for circulating the same message at about the same time to large numbers of people. Wilbur Schramm’s definition does not include group media, folk media as well as word-of-mouth and other personal communications that do not involve the use of devices. The term “mass” indicates that the modern media is experienced not by groups and individuals as per their own culture and location but as a part of a “mass” beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

Capitalism and print media invariably play a profound role in creating political identity and the domain of “public sphere or “public” activity in a nation like India. It is important to comprehend the role and in this regard Harold Innis (1951), a famous scholar from Canada, had courageously asserted the changing role of the print media: “The effect of the discovery of printing was evident in the savage religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Application of power to communication industries hastened the consolidation of vernaculars, the rise of nationalism, revolution and new outbreaks of savagery in the twentieth century” (Innis 29). Innis made it apparent that he firmly believed in the idea that the alterations of communications technology had a greater influence on the history of human beings than any other development that had happened so far. Two of his widely known intellectual successors, Benedict Anderson, renowned for Imagined Communities (1983) and Marshall McLuhan, from whose book
Gutenberg Galaxy (1962), the afore-mentioned quote has been taken, accumulated a great deal of currency by adapting Innis’s viewpoints regarding the role of media in politics.

McLuhan (1962) stated that “print technology... isolates the individual yet also creates massive groupings by means of vernacular nationalism” (McLuhan 258). However, the process of print technology and its use did not merely involve the preservation and dissemination of information. Instead, print changed people’s ways of thinking and behaving. McLuhan had the opinion that the invention of print inflicted a heavy damage on the openness and spontaneity of oral cultures. Print blocked off the varieties of experiences that people enjoyed by necessitating all experiences to be taken seriously as well as capable of being organized and linear-capable of being captured in print. Print ushered in “linearity”, which meant that all experiences could be expressed “in print” and also that it was possible to preserve, pin down and perhaps sell these experiences at a price. The change in communication had a considerable influence on the formation of Governments. By using the Papyrus material, it was easier to write lengthy instructions and carry them reliably over long distances. The dissolving of city states happened and empires came into being. However, when Papyrus became rare, feudalism rose and succeeded until the time when the production of cheap paper and the discovery of the printing press paved the way for huge economic and political empires and nationalism.

When capitalism drove print, it produced “languages of power”, thereby enabling dreams of nations to develop to into a tangible form. Brian Winston (1990), in his essay “How Are Media Born and Developed” (1990), highlighted that the writing of Marshall McLuhan put forward a media- technological explanation of modern society. (Winston 55-72). The same criticism applies to the challenging understandings of Anderson who made the various facets of nationalism popular by taking up McLuhan and Innis’s ideas in the 1980s. The term “print- capitalism”, coined by Anderson, explained the wedding that, as per his belief, gave birth to “nationalism.” For Anderson, “the hallmark of modern nations” was the “remarkable confidence of community in anonymity” (Anderson 36). The newspaper was important to develop that belief. Besides, according to him, the book and the newspaper – an “extreme form of the book” were the first modern-style and mass-produced industrial product, thousands of exact copies of which were made available for sale and to generate profit.
The newspaper was instrumental in yielding two different results. To begin with, it helped in the flourishing of local languages as people were sold mass-produced products. Then it led to the creation of a daily ritual – “a mass ceremony” … a replacement for morning prayers that assured people “the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (Anderson 39-40).

Even though the newspaper, the book and the printing press were crucial for the spread of nationalism, they were not enough by themselves. Nationhood, citizenship and other related ideas were disseminated by the press and not created by it. For conditions to be made appropriate for the printing press to enable people to think of themselves as “citizens” of “nations”, the interconnections between Governments and capitalism had to undergo the much-needed transformation. If print capitalism by itself gave rise to nationalism, then the blossoming of print capitalism was bound to have huge consequences for a country like India, where print-capitalism existed in numerous scripts and various languages. Not in any other region in the world one will find such a variety of languages in so confined a political and geographical space. This idea should be a recipe for powerful, split-up nationalisms, as even critics of the print capitalism argument would perhaps accept that printing and literacy are essential for the upsurge of nationalism as we know it.

The Content of Media

Mediated messages are made up of content and form. Though “content” is considered to be more important than “form”, both are essential for the socializing function performed by the mass media. Content impacts what we learn and the form impacts how we learn. The content of a message is specifically its informational element, which includes the ideas, facts, details and opinions circulated through the mass media. However, most of the times the audience knows about the content of mediated messages. For instance, reading the news is all about collecting information about the world. However, it is noteworthy that the content of a message can be categorized as informational without having truth-value or use-value. The content must be meaningful, and not incomprehensible, to be considered as information. The content of the mass media matters for several reasons. Firstly, by choosing to include or cover
some topics and to exclude or ignore others. Secondly, content lacking in a diversity of views and opinions significantly limits the scope of public debate and deliberation on matters of social importance. Unpopular and dissenting viewpoints are essential to a healthy democracy. Thirdly, because media content is communicated using symbols and all symbols are selective, media content is necessarily biased. The language and images used to inform, educate, and entertain also convey selective attitudes and beliefs. In short, the content of the mass media socializes us to care about some issues and to see those issues from some perspectives and to adopt particular attitudes toward the perspectives it presents. Thus, the attitudes and opinions that we cultivate as part of literate societies are not always truly our own. Most of our thoughts, values, ideals and beliefs picked up by us are communally constructed from the world outside us. There may be conscious or unconscious efforts in the formation of our opinions and attitudes. We cultivate these in a variety of ways. They are brought to us in one or another way through the fast-moving informative network, called the mass media, a communicative machine made up of newspaper, radio, television and now internet. The media machine casts its reflection on the general public thus leaving lasting impressions about our surroundings. These images could be accurate or inaccurate, objective or subjective, but their effect is always crucial to our perception of the world around. They assist us in forming our world view and the fact cannot be ignored in any case that media performs a crucial role in creating these particular images. And amongst the various kinds of images holds crucial importance is that of the role that media plays in projecting images of conflict and violence.

Media and Violence

People have always been drawn to spectacles of violence. As Sissela Bok points out in her book *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment* (1999), the ancient Romans forced slaves and convicts to fight wild animals to death before roaring crowds as a matter of public policy. “Violent spectacles kept the citizenry distracted, engaged, and entertained and . . . provided the continuing acculturation to violence needed by a warrior state” (Bok 16).

Concerns about violence in media predate television. During the nineteenth century, social critics warned that juveniles were mimicking the violence they read about in newspapers, and in the 1920s there was considerable outrage over what was considered
“rampant” violence and lawlessness in the movies. However, the most extensive research on media violence focused on television violence beginning in 1968 when U.S. President Lyndon Johnson convened the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence and commissioned Gerbner to analyze the content of television shows. Gerbner’s research was influential in the landmark 1972 Surgeon General’s report on media violence, which found evidence of “a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior” (Murray 2)

Over three thousand studies were conducted during the past forty years in the United States alone which suggest that there is a “correlation” between social aggression and the viewing of violence on the big and small screens. According to the American Psychological Association, by the time an average American child is ten or eleven years old, he or she is likely to have seen 8000 murders and 10,000 acts of violence on television. Few studies on the subject had been conducted in India, and Indian children were less exposed to excessive violence than American, but due to the rise of the satellite television the exposure continued.

Some psychologists and sociologists are of the view that the heavy dosage of negative news, including those of murders, rapes, and robberies, reeled off at every newscast or presented on the front page of every newspaper, will over a period of time make media users immune to the shock of such deviant action by wrongdoers. Similarly, portrayal of violence in movies and serials makes viewers benumbed and insensitive in the long run to such aberrations. This psychological phenomenon is called narcotisation. This is a universal problem in the media. Media users all over the world watch a large number of deaths, murders, arsons, fires, attacks on women and gruesome killings in movies and serials. They also read about them in newspapers and magazines, including graphic and pornographic details. Some reality shows in the West include clips of scantily clothed women being mauled and bruised by animals, including humans with animal instincts. Some real events have occurred in forests and deserted places and reality TV producers lie in ambush for such events. Viewers naturally watch the most obscene and brutal scenes often, and they become narcotised or drugged and hence insensitive to real-life accidents and tragedies.
The Indian press is more than two centuries old. Its strength has largely been shaped by its historical experience and, in particular, by its association with the freedom struggle as well as movements for social emancipation, reform, and economic amelioration. The long struggle for national emancipation; controversies and battles over social reform; radical and revolutionary aspirations and movements; compromising as well as fighting tendencies; and the competition between self-serving and public service visions of journalism – these all have found reflections in the character and performance of the Indian press over the long term.

The emergence of the indigenous character of the print media in India was directly associated with the socio-religious reform movements in Bengal followed by the struggle for national liberation. Printing press establishments were first brought to India in the 16th century by Christian missionaries for publishing evangelical literature. The presence of Christian missionaries increased along with growing numbers of European traders and soldiers. Historian, Bipan Chandra observes: “Almost from the beginning of the 19th century, politically conscious Indians had attracted to modern civil rights, especially the freedom of the Press” (Chandra 102).

While daily print newspaper circulation had been in decline globally by 17 per cent between 2006 and 2010 in the United States, 11.8 per cent in Western Europe, and 10 per cent in eastern and central Europe, it had risen 16 per cent in Asia - Pacific region and 4.5 per cent in Latin America over the same period (Ram 4). With nearly three-fourths of the world’s 100 top-selling daily newspapers now published in Asia, India and China are regarded as “the world absolute leaders in the newspaper industry” (World Press Trends 6)

Capitalism in the late 20th century preferred large markets. Such a liking had its implications for the Indian press also. The advent of the 20th century marked the changes in the way news was produced and sold. In one way, it fostered the unity of the Indian state by making successful newspaper proprietors as all India actors and on the other the members of the media community as part of the national elite. The reality of
the newspaper business was neither predictable nor secure. Continuous struggles to control newspapers placed reporters, editors and even owners in danger. Those seeking to control newspapers ranged from the state to business people, criminals and secessionists.

Secessionist movements had been most common in many regions of the country, where local capitalism was least developed and certainly where successful capitalist newspapers were the least in circulation. In Assam in the mid 1990s, the ratio of Assamese language daily newspapers to speakers of Assamese was roughly eleven newspapers per 1000 speakers. The same ratio for India as a whole was more than three times greater (Jeffrey 16).

Even Habermas’s observation that the “communicative network of a public made up of rationally debating private citizens” that brought “the political exposure of political domination before the public use of reason”, was, however, short-lived (Jeffrey 12). It was supplanted by mass media in mass industrial society. Habermas referred to the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in that “the institutions of social convivial interchange”, allowed the “public to make use of its reason, lost their power or utterly collapsed”. They were replaced by the “commercial mass circulation press” (Habermas 195) and the transformation “from a public critically reflecting on its culture to one that merely consumes it” (Jeffrey 12). In mass society, “the press and broadcast media serve less as organs of public information and debate than as technologies for managing consensus and promoting consumer culture” (Jeffrey 12).

We need to envisage as some of the critics of Habermas have contended that a public sphere created by mass print media cannot manipulate the masses as the effects of mass media remain unpredictable. The messages of owners and their class are capable of being accepted, rejected or reinterpreted by readers. Readers moreover are capable of injecting their messages into print and pushing their concerns to the fore, rather than simply being pushed in any direction where owners care to guide. Selig Harrison in his book India: The Most Dangerous Decades (1960) foresaw the growing power in a federal democracy of regional elites, propagating local languages and fostering specific nationalism. Burgeoning newspapers in Indian languages would set the linguistic standard for the new regional pulp cultures, reaching out to all social and village levels (Harrison 320).
In India, as newspapers increasingly sought advertising, particularly national advertising, they also had to seek readers because advertisers demanded evidence of value for money. Readers were to be found, as Harrison suggested, in the small towns and countryside, and as such readers wanted to read about themselves. Thus the requirements of national advertisers drove newspapers to localize their production and content and simplify their language. One of the important elements of buying the interest of the readers of newspapers is by the use of local languages. The language used by Hindi newspapers has followed a fascinating trajectory. At the beginning of the 20th century, Hindi was the vehicle for nationalism. The multiplicities of languages offer some guarantee against a national domination of the print media by only one or two chains. Regional newspaper groups also started ‘national’ weekly publications in English but neither threatened established English publications. The sheer number of highly developed languages in India ensures against the sort of national chain dominance that afflicts the press in countries like the US, Canada and Australia. It is conceivable that individual newspapers, once dominant in their language region, will stifle competition and indeed promote local chauvinism or even secessionism.

This transformation of the publishing industry into a business began post 1977, after the Emergency was lifted. The Janata government, which came to power in the post- Emergency elections, repealed most of the regressive laws. Across the country, people bought more newspapers because they wanted to know what had happened in the preceding months. Robin Jeffrey (2000) traced the growth of the Indian language press from 1977-99 and put it down to three factors namely: the growth of literacy, the rise of capitalism and the spread of technology.

The circulation of newspapers and periodicals in India increased remarkably after the end of the Emergency in 1977. Between 1976, which marked the end of Emergency censorship, and 1981, the circulation of daily newspapers in all languages rose from 9.3 million copies a day to 15.3 million copies a day which is an increase of 65 percent. In contrast in the five-year period between 1971-76, daily circulations rose only 2.5 percent.
However, among India’s major languages, the newspaper dailies to people ratio in the year 1981 varied strikingly. Whereas Malayalam had 1:19 ratio, Orissa had 1:32 ratio, Assamese dailies had 1:170. The rate of improvement in the ratio since 1991 has been the fastest for the Assamese which is about 150 percent compared to Punjabi which is 130 percent. There are an estimated 10.6 million Assamese speakers in the state. Assamese, Telugu and Punjabi language dailies have stood out for their rapid rate of increase in the production of dailies. In India, the growth of the language press has proved the latent demand and the need for news in the language that people are comfortable with.

There is a peculiar logic that the more newspapers in circulation, the more quickly and thoroughly the stories will spread. Assamese circulations have fluctuated, but between 1970 and 1980 they had increased by 200 percent. Assam still appeared to have the highest ratio of dailies to population in India. During the 1971 census, the population of the state of Assam included a significant proportion of Bengali speakers. During the Nellie violence of 1983 in Assam, the daily circulation of Assamese dailies was 70,000 if we consider the daily circulation by language in the country (Jeffrey 610). All the languages except Assamese in which daily circulation fell in 1982 had dailies to people ratios about the same as the national average. Assamese language newspapers illustrated political competition and the hunger for a voice. Circulation in the first decade of the 21st century was claimed to have cross 440,000 a day and newspaper penetration exceeded thirty dailies per thousand speakers of Assamese (Jeffrey 241). Assamese newspapers figure in the intersection of the ideological and the commercial.

Readers of the newspaper also retain some power to influence what they read. The desire to be informed about political issues, particularly, local and regional politics is primarily the key for inducing people to become regular newspaper readers and buyers. For the newspaper owners, it is not enough to provide for the readers’ need, but also to satisfy the advertisers. In spite of the power that the press enjoys, the newspapers are mainly shaped by the needs of advertisers and passion of readers.

The Context of Assam

For the first time in Orunodoi the term Asomiya (Assamese) appeared; and started creating the boundaries of a linguistic identity for the people. After Orunodoi,
several other newspapers came up which contributed in imagining and constructing the vernacular through Assamese language in print. Although the printing press, the book and the newspaper were no doubt essential for the propagation of nationalism, they were not sufficient by themselves. Relationships between capitalists and Governments had to change before conditions were suitable for the printing press to enable people to conceive of themselves as “citizens” of “nations”. Ideas of citizenship and nationhood were carried by the press, not made by them.

However, it is interesting to note that after Orunudoi, the second Assamese newspaper Assam Bilasini was published by a Vaishnavite Xatra of Majuli, primarily to counter the Christian aggression. It reveals how the spaces of the emerging print media were tried to fill in with the vernacular, establishing the boundaries between the self and the other(s). The Assamese press continued to play an important role in the history of the Independence movement. The long history of the press throughout the nineteenth century changed the press from missionary activity to one with a nationalist agenda. After 1880, when the Orunodoi stopped its publication there was a huge void that was hard to fill. Although dailies had not appeared until 1935, a few weeklies that existed along with Orunodoi also stopped after few years. The first daily in Assam was the Dainik Batori that was published from Jorhat. Nilomoni Phukon was the editor, and it started appearing from August 12, 1935. It was distributed mainly in the upper Assam region and carried advertisements for most parts. It closed down in 1937. The next daily that emerged was not until 1946 when the Dainik Asomiya was published under the editorship of Chandra Kumar Agarwalla. It too closed down in 1949. These dailies played an important role during the freedom struggle. Although press in Assam had its roots in colonial enterprise it revolted against the very source of its existence i.e. the colonial powers. In this regard Sonwalkar (2002) comments: “A notable feature of the Indian press was the speed at which the ideas, tools and processes of modernity were introduced, absorbed and spread across the sub-continent, and then deployed against the very source that had introduced them in the first place: the British colonial system” (Sonwalkar 824). In 1949 itself Notun Asomiya, another daily was published from Guwahati. Notun Asomiya was helmed at various stages by icons of Assamese journalism viz. Debakanta Baruah and Birinchi Kumar Baruah. This newspaper went on publishing till 1982. The next line of dailies came only after independence, and the major two newspapers were Dainik Asom and Dainik Janmabhoomi which started
publication in 1965 and 1972 respectively. While *Dainik Asom* came out from Guwahati, *Dainik Janmabhoomi* belonged to Jorhat. These next set of newspapers played an active role in the Assam agitation. The number of newspapers in Assam was small in the period before independence. In the pre-independence era most of the newspapers and reporters did not regard this profession as lucrative. They took it as a “mission” in the service of the country or as a great duty of specific purpose. Besides the loss of money, there was the anger of the Government that led the newspapers to pay fines, or undergo imprisonment. After Independence, the newspapers have become a profitable, honorable and powerful institution. Its power and importance have increased. Some newspaper establishments have published newspapers in several languages such as Assamese, Bengali and English, and also in different formats such as daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly.

One of the most important events in the history of Assam was the agitation against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh then known as East Pakistan. And the language issue was at the centre of the agitation, popularly known as Assam agitation or Assam movement. The indigenous people of Assam felt that the Assamese language could soon be wiped out as a result of the large-scale migration of Bengali speaking refugees. Most of this fear was historical in nature, as educated Bengalis were preferred by the British to work for them in the tea gardens of Assam. It was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, a freedom fighter from Assam, who first talked of an Assamese ‘nation’ and made language the unifying symbol of its identity consciousness.

The influence of the press in a mass movement such as Assam Agitation was a record of sorts. A very important point to be noted is the idea of language and literacy. Literacy levels were quite low at that time; therefore the preference of the language used by the people of the state for education became a sensitive issue. Language was at the center of the agitation. Sanjib Baruah, an eminent author comments: “Two key organizations that play a central role in the constitution of Assamese civil society are: the ‘Assam Sahitya Sabha’ and the ‘All Assam Students Union’. That both organizations call themselves ‘non-political’ is significant in order to understand their location in civil society” (Baruah 665).
From the period of the fall of the Janata government in 1979 till the time the parliamentary elections got over in 1980 with Indira Gandhi taking over as the Prime Minister of the country, there was complete lawlessness in the state. The Assam agitation was at its peak during the period, and the press in Assam played a pivotal role during this phase. “Detect, disenfranchise and deport or disperse all ‘foreigners’, these were the main slogans around which the agitation was built up and is still sustained by a united front of several local organizations, with the backing of the local press media” (Dasgupta and Guha 843). Post Janata government, the volatile situation in Assam continued unabated. “Not just the members of organizations such as AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) who were active during the agitation even government machinery was found to be hand in glove with them. The police, the bureaucracy, the lower echelons of the judiciary and even the Guwahati Broadcasting Station of the AIR all were found colluding to boost the agitation” (Dasgupta and Guha 843). It was during this period that the press took an active role in the agitation. Some of the left leaning publications also had to face the brunt of the agitators; while in general, the press supported the idea of the agitation. “From June 1979 onwards, the press directed its hatred campaign almost exclusively against the so called ‘Bangladeshis’” (Guha 1706).

The press was under the direct control of the capitalist class in Assam during the Assam Agitation. And the press enabled itself to be the change that the middle class was looking for. Without the active participation of the press in Assam during the period of 1979-1985, the agitation would not have been successful, the rallying call was given by the press; editors of most newspapers became active members of the protest. Many journalists were activist reporters who helped in opinion formation in favour of the agitation. The Assam Sahitya Sabha and organizations such as those remained only ideologues and tried to remain away from the political process. It was AASU that became politically involved, as seen later it transformed itself into a political party, in organizing the support that the agitation needed and, which was dictated by the press instilled by its idea of cultural nationalism.

In Assam, even barely literate people used to discuss the ideas of culture and progress as propagated by the press. Profit was not the chief motive before the Assam movement and print was mostly confined to elite class. It began when a majority of
Assamese among whom the literacy had grown, found a newspaper to engage
themselves in the politics since 1979. As the newspaper reading habit expanded, the
prevalence of newspapers and their keenness for local news opened new avenues for
politics. The desire to know; created political involvement and provoked strong demand
for existing local dailies. In response to the demand, the owners created an environment
for the readers to read what they liked to read. In this process, the regional media of
Assam took an ambivalent position between ideology and pushing circulation of their
news papers.

Moreover, the emergence of the printing press under capitalism including both
the newspaper and other vernacular printed resources played an imperative role in the
construction of the image of a nation amongst the Assamese. The year 1846 was the
beginning of print media in Assam. The first Assamese newspaper Orunodoi was
published by the Baptist missionaries from Sivasagar in upper Assam. While the overtly
visible objective of the missionaries was to propagate the Christian faith in Assam
through such publication, this led to the emergence of a standardized form of Assamese
language which soon became the foundation for ‘Assamese nationalism.’

In this regard, Benedict Anderson’s (1983) thesis of imagined community can
help in understanding and theorizing the processes of identity consciousness in Assam
after the advent of printing technology. In his thesis on Imagined Communities,
Anderson depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people
who perceive themselves as part of that group. Creation of imagined communities
became possible because of "print capitalism."In Assam the surge of vernacular media
created a wider reading public.

Conclusion

The proper role of the free and responsible press in an era of violence and conflict
can only be understood if we agree to understand the meaning of the freedom of the
press and the nature and origins of violence in our society. Media is not a monolithic
organization. Each media house viz. newspaper, radio or television network has its own
culture and tradition. Ownership patterns, structures and the kind of commitment to
journalism, all count to characterize and differentiate one newspaper from another. In a
democracy, its role is to provide unbiased, trustworthy information to the citizens so that they can form informed opinions and participate in the democratic process. Journalists recognize that truthful information in a violent situation such as in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir or earlier in the Northeast is always hard to get. And when information is available, with limited sources to cross check, it becomes impossible to believe or to disbelieve it. There are many apprehensions as there are myths. Mass media is no longer seen as a purveyor of neutral information and contemplative comments. Idealism and liberalism have, by and large, deserted the profession of journalism. It has become a business like any other and seeks to maximize profit. Technology has opened vast possibilities and pushed the boundaries beyond limits.

Moreover, there cannot be a definitive theory either of media or of social conflict. Both are extremely complex and dynamic subjects. At best, one can attempt certain concepts and assumptions about the actual potential and role of the media in response to violent conflicts, so widespread across the countries. Twentieth century was the most violent century in the history of mankind and claimed millions of lives in wars and conflicts. As to the freedom of the press, we have to recognize that we will never be free of restraint, never free of harassment legally or physically, still less never free of criticism. The most piquant definition of news, in fact comes to us from Lord Northcliffe, owner of *The Times* who declared, “news is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress. Everything else is advertising” (Rose 201). The “power” of the press depends on its credibility among the readers as well as on how the news reported is understood and interpreted. Different groups read the same news item in varied ways depending on their own social background. How news is read is not entirely in the hands of the journalist. Indeed, the press often succeeds only in reinforcing widely held beliefs and the status quo rather than bringing about change and development. The key concern on the rising trend of the readers in Assam relates to its consequence for regional identity and cultural consciousness. However, for the journalist to achieve a balance between freedom and responsibility, the ethical aspects of the dichotomy depend not only on conscious decisions by a journalist, but also on practices in the media and social environment. In the Press Council of India’s guide to journalistic ethics, the news, views or comments relating to communal or religious disputes/clashes should be published after proper verification of facts and presented with due caution and restraint in a manner which is conducive to the reaction of an atmosphere congenial
to communal harmony, amity and peace. It also states that giving community wise figures of the victims of communal riot, or writing to inflame passions aggravate the tensions or accentuate the strained relations between communities, religious groups concerned or which has a potential to exacerbate the trouble should be avoided.

But, quite interestingly, The Indian Constitution confers no special rights or privileges to the press as does the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. However, Article 19(i) (a) of the Constitution does guarantee freedom of expression for every citizen which includes:

i. The right to lay what sentiments he pleases before the public, or the right to impart information and ideas.

ii. The right to receive information and ideas from other through any lawful medium.

In the same context, Chris Hedges, veteran war reporter for the *New York Times*, maintains that “In wartime the press is always part of the problem. . . when the nation goes to war, the press goes to war with it. The blather on CNN or Fox or MSNBC is part of a long and sad tradition” (Hedges 16). Nearly indistinguishable in the message, the excerpts from the Washington Post's editorial and President Bush’s speech above reveal a great deal about the comfortable relationship between the American media and the Bush administration at the onset of the invasion of Iraq. For those who critically followed media reporting of the Iraq war, the similarity between Government statements and news editorials is of no surprise. Rather than serving as hostile medium, challenging government statements about the war, reporters interpreted their commitment to “objectivity” as excluding or limiting critical approaches to evaluating the Iraq war.

Thus, it can be remarked that news is not a mirror of reality. It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective. This means that some human beings must do the selecting; certain people make decisions about what to present as news and how to present it. *Washington Post* columnist David Broder writes that the process of selecting what the reader reads involves not just objective facts, but subjective judgments, personal values and prejudices. He comments: “Instead of promising ‘All
the News That’s Fit to print.’ I would like to see us say – over and over, until the point
has been made-that newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things
we have heard about in the past 24 hours-- distorted, despite our best efforts to eliminate
gross bias, by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to lift it
from the doorstep and read it in about an hour” (Broder 14)

Many critics of the media assume that somewhere there is a perfectly objective or
fair way to represent each event in the world. They further assume that any deviation
from fair representation can be accounted for by media bias. “Bias” in this context
means that the reporter, editor, or news institution owner knows what the real event
looks like, but will colour it to advance a political, economic, or ideological aim. In this
case, views at the margins get little coverage, not because they lack validity or interest,
but because they lack official sponsorship. If the corporate structure of the media does
not in itself determine news content, it still tends to marginalize some news and some
ways of telling the news. It still tends to subordinate news values to commercial values.
Thus, the news media’s obsession with objectivity can be particularly problematic when
it comes to stories about violence. By blindly obeying the journalistic mandate to
remain neutral, we often fail to absorb the tragic proportions of a violent event. We can
become immune to the suffering of others, which often is the story when it comes to
violence. Even worse, the objective mandate can lead us to conclude that viewing
suffering or abuse dispassionately, or even cynically, is more morally correct than
viewing it with outrage or compassion.