

Normative Theories of Mass Media: PMPD Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In line with Marxist notions regarding the functioning of mass media, Madan Bhandari's notion of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD) deviates from the legacy of the Soviet communist theory of the press. Although Bhandari has not extensively expounded on media operations, his writings reflect a trajectory toward the establishment of a society built on freedom of expression. As the former Spokesperson and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN [UML]), Bhandari's ideas, thoughts, and aspirations resonated with the Nepali public following the People's Movement of 1990. During this relatively brief period, Bhandari effectively communicated his message by incorporating elements of Marxism. Bhandari expressed himself through large-scale public gatherings, mass media interviews, and party documents, including the PMPD, which was overwhelmingly adopted by the Fifth National General Convention of the CPN (UML) in February 1993. This paper, employing qualitative and constructivist approaches, concludes that PMPD contains the seeds of a normative theory that envisions a free media environment conducive to plurality, as well as political competition that is both free and healthy in society. Bhandari consistently advocated for plurality and media.

Introduction

In accordance with Marxist notions regarding the functioning of mass media, Madan Bhandari's concept of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD) departs from the legacy of the Soviet communist theory of the press. Although Bhandari has not extensively elaborated on media operations, his writings indicate a trajectory toward establishing a society based on freedom of expression. As the former Spokesperson and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN [UML]), Bhandari's ideas, thoughts, and aspirations resonated with the Nepali public following the People's Movement of 1990. During this

relatively brief period, Bhandari effectively conveyed his message by incorporating elements of Marxism. Bhandari expressed himself through large-scale public gatherings, mass media interviews, and party documents, including the PMPD, which was overwhelmingly adopted by the Fifth National Convention of the CPN (UML) in February 1993. This paper, utilizing qualitative and constructivist approaches, concludes that PMPD contains the seeds of a normative theory envisioning a free media environment conducive to plurality and healthy political competition in society.

Bhandari consistently advocated for plurality and competition in his speeches. Notably,

Bhandari brought the Communist Movement of Nepal to practical grounds by presenting the notion of pluralism and competition at the fourth convention of the then CPN (ML) in late 1989 (Central Committee, CPN [UML], 2052 B.S.). Bhandari continued to struggle to establish a creative approach to using Marxism in the context of Nepal, explaining his ideas in limited forums when the party was still underground. Additionally, he discussed competitive politics while completing a document on the responsibility of his party in late 1990. Subsequently, in early 1991, Bhandari facilitated the unification of the then CPN (Marxist) and the CPN (ML) based on political competition (vii). Bhandari consistently expressed his ideas in favor of open competition, fair discussion, and argumentation.

Before the Fifth National General Convention of the CPN (UML), Bhandari (2048 B.S.) publicly presented his idea of pluralism and competition. In that presentation, which later became the principle of PMPD, Bhandari strongly defended Marxism but pointed out its wrong practice in socialist countries across the world; he argued that the socialist countries either imposed one-party ruling systems or disallowed fair competition even if they allowed other parties to exist. In those countries, all other parties were confined to the role of subordinates to the ruling communist party. Bhandari argued that such a practice of Marxism led to a public perception that communism was a one-party rule, and the multiparty system was seen as a capitalist enterprise. Bhandari asserted that his party stood for multiparty democracy and was equally conscious of maintaining the pro-people essence of communist rule. Considering the Nepali communist parties' decades-long struggle against the party-less Panchayat regime, Bhandari reiterated that a one-party system was not suitable in Nepal. Through a thorough study of different facets of the world situation developed after Marx and Lenin, Bhandari argued that his party advocated adopting a pluralistic state apparatus by protecting and developing revolutionary essence (2048 B.S.: 11). Thus,

Bhandari engaged in a struggle to consolidate his thesis on PMPD.

According to records (Central Committee, CPN [UML], 2052 B.S.), Bhandari officially presented his idea of a pluralistic open society at the party convention in February 1993 as the program of the Nepali revolution. Bhandari explicitly stated that every individual was entitled to the freedom of thought and speech in the country (333). After the adoption of PMPD by the Fifth National General Convention of the party, Bhandari continued to elaborate on his notion of PMPD, but his demise in a mysterious road accident in May 1993 brought it to a halt. Recognizing that the plurality of politics necessitates media freedom and freedom of expression, PMPD cannot adhere to the media system practiced in the USSR for 70 years. Madan Bhandari had no doubts about that matter.

Bhandari (2048 B.S.) asserted that his party had a long history of advocating for the unhindered availability of people's fundamental rights. He further emphasized that people's fundamental rights encompass writing, publishing, speaking, organizing associations and parties, meetings, and the right to vote. Bhandari stated that it would not be democratic to concentrate all powers in one party's hands, irrespective of communism or any other party (12). Bhandari (1991) stressed that the main objective of communism was to eliminate exploitation, corruption, and injustice in society. Moreover, Bhandari pointed out that if there had been mistakes in the past while implementing that policy, it did not mean that the objectives of communism had failed. He made it clear that his party had decided to establish democracy and would have taken power only after obtaining a mandate from the people (58). Bhandari advocated for openness and competition even after the communist party's ascent to power, and he believed that such a revolution could be achieved without resorting to the use of arms.

Bhandari (1991) mentioned that China was liberated by armed struggle, but Nepal was in a

peaceful movement. He recognized that China and North Korea had been facing foreign hegemony and aggression (58). Hence, Bhandari was highly receptive to learning from history. Bhandari not only learned from Nepal's history but also drew lessons from other countries.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that Bhandari's political thoughts, mainly enshrined in PMPD, have adequate elements to create a normative schema for the smooth functioning of the mass media in contemporary Nepali society. In light of PMPD, a media landscape is envisioned where the mass media of communication, as the means of mental production, would be free from any sort of manipulation, including commercial interests. The normative theories propose various media systems to be regulated, controlled, or operated by state authority, political regimes, ruling elites, or the public. Hence, the imperatives of normative functions of mass media in PMPD pertain to questions related to people's reach and access to the media and the utility of media content for empowerment.

Methodology

The paper provides readers with the background of the evolution of PMPD as a creative offshoot of Marxism. Its primary objective is to illustrate PMPD as an antidote to the aftermath of the USSR's disintegration in 1991, as well as the downfall of communist regimes in East European countries. This research aims to help readers understand its relevance to other research related to the 1990s.

The paper employs a qualitative approach to interpret and present the social world concerning an ideal mass media system under Marxism in the twenty-first century. It adopts interpretive and analytic approaches.

Qualitative researchers begin with self-assessment and reflection about their position in a socio-historical context. As Neuman (2006: 14-15) contends, qualitative research is a highly self-aware acknowledgment of the researcher's social self and position in society. Accordingly,

the paper reveals the writers' social perspective. Therefore, the paper does not narrowly focus on a specific question but engages in an inquisitive, open-ended process of pondering the theoretical-philosophical paradigm. It adopts a constructivist approach, as Hammersley (2013: 35) posits, based on the belief that perception and cognition are active processes involving selection and construction.

The source of data and the basis for the interpretation of this article are publications produced by Madan Bhandari himself, posthumous publications to his credit, his published interviews, and a few political documents of CPN (UML). This paper delves into the argument and ideas presented by Bhandari and the salient features of his brainchild PMPD that are directly or indirectly linked to media freedom.

Normative theories of mass media

As concluded 60 years ago in "Four Theories of the Press," the links between distinctive political regimes and media systems are undeniable. Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1972) stated that the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates (1). Normative theories of mass media, previously referred to as the press in 1956, deal with the relationship between the political system in a country and the mass media system there.

The classical theories included the Soviet Communist theory of the Press under the Marxist legacy (Schramm, 1972). However, it is speculated that the Soviet Communist Theory existed up to the year 1991 and was not in line with Marxism. Hence, the comprehensive idea of normative theories of the press, as presented by the trio in 1956, could still be considered relevant in a broader sense. However, unlike the other three press categories, namely, Authoritarian, Libertarian, and Social Responsibility, presented within their seminal work "Four Theories of the Press," the category of Soviet Communist Concepts scrambled with the end of the Cold War. The downfall of the political system established

by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin also prompted communists worldwide to speculate on their theories of mass media. In such intricacies of contemporary global politics, a communist leader from Nepal postulated a new model of the communist system through his in-depth introspection of the communist world. His idea of fortifying communist parties amidst competition, thus, laid the foundation of free media. Bhandari, on the one hand, denied the norms set by the Soviet Communist Theory concerning what the press should be and do. On the other hand, he argued that political freedom, including the freedom of expression and opinion, could go hand in hand with the Marxist political principle.

Earlier, as described in “Four Theories of the Press,” the mass media in the Soviet communist theory must undergo direct control and monopoly of the government. They must function under government control. It means, instead of leaving all or most of the channels of communication in the hands of private interests, it is the Communist Party, holding the lever of power that, in the name of citizens, owns, operates, invests in, and directly distributes mass communication in the spirit of the revolution. In the Soviet Communist theoretical supposition, the communicative power of the media is bound to be an apparatus for the suitable functioning of the regime. The theory assumes that the regime has the duty, obligation, and responsibility of informing, regulating, and guiding the public in achieving the common good. Hence, the communication objectives, processes, and messages were determined by the Communist Party juxtaposed with the public sphere or the market as in liberal democracy.

Results and Discussion

Through the lens of Marxism before the October Revolution

Fuchs (2020) extensively discussed Marx’s ideas in the context of communication, culture,

and the media. Stating that Marx’s approach to the analysis of society used dialectic as a way of thinking and a method of analysis (4), he stated that in communication, humans produce and reproduce social relations, social structures, social systems, and society (9). Hence, in the course of discussion on how to make use of Marx’s ideas in media, communication, and cultural studies, Fuchs (2020) stated that communication was the production process of human society. He also viewed dialectic as a helpful tool for thinking critically about media, culture, and communication (9-10). However, after the success of the October Revolution, the basic idea of Marxism was ignored in the USSR. Eventually, that came to be one of the prominent causes of the downfall of the state.

In the course of explaining Marx’s idea of taking the communication process as the dialectic of subject and object, Fuchs (2020: 9) presented an example of human communication: A human subject S1 communicates information to another human being S2. S2 is S1’s object because the symbols are communicated by S1, then S2 is the subject and S1 is the object who interprets the communicated information. The subject is at the same time an object and the object is a subject. New qualities and systems can emerge from this contradictory relation. Fuchs argued that if two people communicated long enough, they might find out that they had joint interests and so a new social system such as a friendship or a hobby group, or a professional organization may emerge (9). Hence, Marx stood against the hindrances of the free flow of communication and wished to see the emergence of new realities out of the contradictory relations in a dynamic society.

Fuchs (2020) summarized that in media and communication studies and cultural analysis, the dialectic allows us to understand communication as a subject/object dialectic, to ask critical questions about the media, and to challenge technological determinism by the dialectic of technology and society (17). Analyzing media through the lens of Marxism,

Fuchs (2020: 24) further stated that production and social matter are the content of the economic system and that the realm of politics, culture, ideas, legal matters, belief, religion, art, philosophy-what some call social consciousness-is located as a “superstructure” outside and on top of the economic system (“the base”). McQuail and Deuze (2020) also stated that Marxist theory posits a direct link between economic structure, ownership, and the dissemination of messages that affirm the legitimacy and the value of a class society. These views have been supported in modern times by evidence of tendencies towards the great concentration of media ownership by capitalist entrepreneurs and by much correlative evidence of conservative tendencies in the content of media so organized (157). The political economy theory of mass media as an offspring of Marxism has been proven to be instrumental in problematizing the phenomena.

Schramm (1972: 105-106), along with his friends, mentioned in his words, that they tried to trace Soviet Communist Theory from its roots in Marx through its mutations in the gardens of Lenin and Stalin to understand the Soviet theory of mass communication during the 1950s. It is Schramm (1972: 106) stated that Marx himself more than once expressed dissatisfaction with what his followers were doing to his idea. He further mentioned that “*Je ne suis pas marxiste* [I myself am not a Marxist],” Marx himself said in disgust, and he might have made another such disclaimer between 1917 and 1991 if he could have seen what had happened to his doctrine in Russia and its allied countries.

Schramm (1972) asserted that the media were, therefore, instruments to be controlled by the state (on behalf of the people) through control of the material facilities of communication; private media thus went out of existence very early in Soviet history. He further mentioned that the media should be used as instruments to convey the “word” as interpreted by the Kremlin. The media should be used as instruments of social change and social control, in a tightly unified, closely drawn frame of reference (116). However, Kunczik

(1995) viewed that the role of journalism in socialism as it exists, in reality, was irreconcilable with the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. He stated that Marx was fully aware of the negative consequences of press censorship. He quoted Marx as saying that the censored press has a demoralizing effect. Marx considered that it was potentiated evil, from which hypocrisy is inseparable, and from this fundamental evil flow all its other weaknesses. The government hears only its voice, it knows that it hears only its voice, and yet fixes itself in the delusion it is hearing the voice of the people and demands that they, too, affix to this delusion (73). As quoted by Kunczik (1995), Koschwitz (1974) states that the then East European press policy cannot be claimed to be in the spirit of Marx, who was still wholly in the tradition of the time running up to the 1848 German Revolution. Where press freedom was equated with the freedom of the state. The political press, in particular, was an expression of the people’s voice vis-a-vis the government (73). Eventually, as Watson (2004:102) mentions, the Soviet system has passed away, and with it, for the time being at least Soviet Media Theory. It could be concluded that there was a direct causal relationship between the mutation of Marxism in the then USSR and its downfall after seven decades.

Bhandari’s creative Marxism and mass media

Amidst the upheavals of the 1990s, Bhandari (1991) came forward with the argument that the exploitation of people at the hand of the rich capitalist class must be eliminated. However, he explicitly stated that any socialist revolution is not going to be carried out instantly. Hence, private ownership of the means of production is not going to be put to an end (4). Here, Bhandari departed from the legacy of Marxism as practiced in the former Soviet Union. However, he again held the spirit of Marxism as envisaged by Marx himself. Kunczik (1995: 73) views that Marx took the view that where there was no press freedom, all other freedoms would become illusory.

At the point of time of the downfall of the USSR and consequently communism in Eastern

Europe, Bhandari stated that the experiment with Marxist theory in different countries, however, suggested that the redefinition and reorientation of Marxism were necessary to guarantee its stability and reproof and that there is no alternative to Marxism, which can ensure the development of productive forces, the elimination of exploitation from societies, liberation, freedom, and progress of human beings (MBF, 2021: 38). Bhandari asserted that orthodox Marxism did not recognize that all the achievements of humans are common. As per the MBF records (2021), Bhandari vowed that the essence of a people's multiparty system (although some socialist countries in Eastern Europe claimed that they were following a multiparty system, in practice they were not) in socialist countries permits the existence and operation of various parties and considers that a communist party should also compete in the election and it should get the mandate from people from time to time to rule the country and run the government. We believe that only a people's multiparty democracy based on the rule of law can alert us to check the mistakes and sustain the popularity of the party among the people (48). Hence, Bhandari introduced discourse on the traditional way of implementation of Marxism in the governance in Western Europe and suggested the way forward in the context of Nepal.

Bhandari envisaged a people's multiparty polity with the substances of independent mass media. Bhandari, in the 1993 seminar organized in India on the occasion of the 175th birth anniversary of Marx, stated that the absence of democratic practices in the party and the lack of interaction between people and leaders coupled with the institutionalization of corruption led to increasing resentment among the people despite equality in income distribution and the implementation of the social welfare program on a mass scale. Bhandari further explained that the suppression of dissident views and the inability to provide incentives to working people at different levels created a situation in which no managers and workers were

motivated to raise productivity and enhance efficiency in the production process. Since the Marxism implemented in the Soviet Union was experimental, the process of continuous correction and reform based on the assessment of successes and failures in various areas was needed (MBF, 2021: 41-42). Bhandari stresses pluralism in polity and the idea of establishing superiority through democratic competition within and outside the communist party.

Marx on ruling class and ruling ideas

For classical Marxism, the ruling classes employ intellectuals and cultural producers who both produce ideas that glorify the dominant institutions and ways of life and subsequently propagate the governing ideas in cultural forms such as the contents of the mass media. McQuail (2005) states that while Karl Marx only knew the press before it was a true mass medium, the tradition of Marxist analysis of the media in capitalist society is still of some relevance (95). For McQuail (2005), the question of power is central to Marxist interpretations of mass media. While varied, these have always emphasized the fact that ultimately they are instruments of control by and for a ruling class. Further, to strengthen his interpretation he quotes Marx from his seminal work "German Ideology" citing Murdock and Golding (1977: 15), as follows: "The class that has the means of material production has 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" (95). Marx and Engels (2001) state, in collected works vol. 5 in 1976, that the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. Then they opine that the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to

it (39). Private ownership of mass media outlets was not allowed in the then USSR on the pretext that means of mental production should not be in the hands of individual ownership.

Raymond Williams' Critique on Mass Media is also useful to understand Marx's idea regarding the state of media. Curran, James, and Jean Seaton (2003) state that commercial television produces audiences, not programs. Advertisers, in purchasing a few seconds of television time, are buying viewers by the thousand. The price they pay is determined by the number of people who can be expected to be watching when their advert is shown. Hence advertisers regard programs merely as how audiences are delivered to them (179). Williams (1996) terms this tendency as a commercial media system. He states that The four systems described, authoritarian, paternal, commercial, and democratic, are all to some extent active, in practice or local experiment, in contemporary Britain. The vestiges of authoritarianism are there, in certain kinds of censorship; the first experiments in democracy are also there, in local ways. "... the kinds of a communication system which we have had or known about or wanted (124)." But the main struggle, over the last generation, has been between the paternal and commercial systems, and it looks as if the commercial has been steadily winning. The control claimed as a matter of power by authoritarians, and as a matter of principle by paternalists, is often achieved as a matter of practice in the operation of the commercial system. The first three communications systems are political, cultural, and commercial expressions of instrumental reason. Authoritarian communications involve state control, manipulation, and censorship of the media. The 'purpose of communication is to protect, maintain, or advance a social order based on minority power' (131). Paternal communications are authoritarian communications 'with a conscience: that is to say, with values and purposes beyond the maintenance of its power' (131). In such communication systems, there is ideological control that aims to impose certain moral values on audiences. The controllers of paternal communication systems

assume that specific morals are good for citizens and that the latter are too silly to understand the world. In commercial communications, there is commercial control: 'Anything can be said, provided that you can afford to say it and that you can say it profitably' (133).

In such a context, Herman and Chomsky (1988) opine that money and power can filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public (2). According to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects shape mass-media interests and choices.

Conclusion

Today, a normative theory under PMPD needs to be capable of fostering independent and accountable media, which needs to be accessible to the general public as well. The Political Economy Theory of Mass Media, as an offspring of Marxism, can be the answer to capitalist monopoly and concentration. Likewise, PMPD needs to ensure the justifiable distribution of media outlets as the means of mental production. The decline of the division created by the Cold War depicted liberal democracy and authoritarianism and communism as binary oppositions in explaining differences in the media's functioning around the world. But things changed in the 1990s. Against this situation, PMPD presents a roadmap, a creative extension of Marxism, where means of mental production would be under the people's scrutiny, where the contents of mass media would not be the outcome of commercial interests, and the outlets would not be subjected to any sort of political censorship. Furthermore, people would be empowered to make informed choices in socio-political affairs. Hence, traces of the normative theories of mass media in PMPD could be found in Bhandari's critique of the functioning of the then USSR and the Eastern European countries with its influence. Some of the noticeable features of PMPD, out of 14 major and added features, need to be considered as determining factors of the Normative Theory of Mass Media in the PMPD perspective. How

can a pluralistic open society be envisaged without the freedom of the press? Likewise, the notion of protecting human rights inevitably covers freedom of opinion expression, which is considered one of the major human rights, an anchor for all other human rights. Similarly, a multi-party competitive system and periodic elections cannot be there and cannot be in existence in the absence of media freedom. Hence, PMPD rejects the Soviet Communist Theory of the Press and presents a clear outline for the freedom of expression and opinion. Bhandari's expressions in different forms and occasions can be synthesized that his idea of a normative theory of the mass media encourages the free, frank, and fair expression of thought and opinions. Since society, in his spirit, requires a wider range of discourse on socio-political affairs, PMPD would be incomplete without enhancing plurality and diversity in the source and manifestation of media content.

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