A NORMATIVE THEORY FOR CONFLICT REPORTING

Dr. Ganesh Sethi*

Cultivation Theory:

George Gerbner and his associates at the Annenberg School Journalism developed the cultivation theory also referred to as the cultivation hypothesis or cultivation analysis — in 1969.

The project studied whether and how watching television may influence viewers' ideas of what the everyday world is like. Gerbner and his team studied long-term, cumulative effects of exposure to mass media.

They started by content analyzing television programming for their "cultural indicators" and found high level of violence that provided an inaccurate picture of reality. Audience research showed that viewers who watched more television tended to have more consistent (mainstreamed) views and attitudes, and they shared a more pessimistic perception of reality (the mean world syndrome). 1 Cultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant.

Cultivation research looks at the mass media as a socializing agent and investigates whether television viewers come to believe the television version of reality the more they watch it. Gerbner and his colleagues contend that television drama has a small but significant influence on the attitudes, beliefs and judgements of viewers concerning the social world. Judith van Evra argues that by virtue of inexperience, young viewers may depend on television for information more than other viewers do (van Evra 1990, p. 167), although Hawkins and Pingree argue that some children may not experience a cultivation effect at all where they do not understand motives or consequences (cited by van Evra, ibid.). It may be that lone viewers are more open to a cultivation effect than those who view with others (van Evra 1990, p. 171).

Over 20 years of research has provided only qualified support for high exposure to dramatic programming in adults. (Morgan & Shanahan, 1977). 2
However television news can frame the evaluation of political figures and define political agendas for the public (Iyengar & Kinder). 3

One news source that has the potential to cultivate stable expectations in the public is local television news. Not only has it become the most widely used news source for Americans, but it also has unique conventions that make its content especially relevant for the public's views of crime. Although this news source presumes to give viewers factual stories about their media region, it relies heavily on sensational coverage of crime and other mayhem with particular emphasis on homicide and violence. This coverage could well increase fear of crime by cultivating expectations that victimization is both likely and beyond our control. 4

Television is seen by Gerbner as dominating our 'symbolic environment'. As McQuail and Windahl note, cultivation theory presents television as 'not a window on or reflection of the world, but a world in itself.'

Normative Theories:

Normative theories of journalism concern ideal functions of the press, what the press should do. Journalistic practice does not always align with normative theories of journalism, but these theories remain an important component of ideal practice. Institutions and the state draw upon theories of journalism, implicitly or explicitly, when shaping media policies that carry real incentives or penalties for deviant behavior.

Scholars attempting to classify normative theories (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956, McQuail 1983 and 2005, Ferree et al. 2002, Baker 2002), as well as less systematic reflections about media and democracy, have identified non-democratic theories, including authoritarian, totalitarian, Marxist-Leninist, and developmental, as well as democratic theories, including libertarian, social responsibility, democratic elite, democratic participatory, public sphere, and postmodern.

Authoritarian theory holds that journalism should always be subordinate to the interests of the state in maintaining social order or achieving political goals (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956). At a minimum, the press is expected to avoid any criticisms of government officials and to do nothing to challenge the established order. The press may remain free to publish without prior censorship, but the state retains the right to punish journalists or close media outlets that overstep explicit or implicit limits on reporting and commentary. 5

Under more extreme authoritarianism, a closely censored press pro-actively promotes and extends state control over society. In the context of the Cold War, the Soviet-Communist theory stood out (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956). Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, versions of Marxist-Leninist, or Soviet, theory have survived in North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam, and to a certain extent in China, as the most coherent, self-consciously elaborated examples. The Soviet normative theory of journalism posits that media should not be privately owned, should serve the interests of the working classes, and most importantly, should provide a complete, objective view of the world following Marxist-Leninist principles, as defined by the communist-party controlled state. Another normative theory (some writers have described the theory as non-democratic).

Development theory is authoritarianism for a good cause supporting the economic development and nation-building efforts of impoverished societies (Schramm 1964, McQuail 1983). 6

In the context of western dominance in international news gathering, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also framed development theory in cultural pluralist terms as the right to communicate (McBride et al. 1980). 7
The western press and communication research generally portray these non-democratic theories negatively, as anti-democratic.

In non-Western societies for example, these approaches are regarded more positive. The Chinese government, for instance, defends a market socialist approach to the media, which combines limited market freedoms with continuing state control.

Democratic normative theories have been motivating forces behind emerging non-western media outlets such as the Qatar-based Arabic language cable news channel Al-Jazeera (modeled after the BBC and CNN). Even in the most repressive authoritarian states, the language of democracy has become commonplace.

Where authoritarianism stresses the importance of maintaining social order, libertarianism aims to maximize individual human freedom. John Locke and other liberal philosophers of the eighteenth century conceived of the libertarian theory (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956), which relates closely with laissez-faire capitalism. In the oft-used metaphor, the press should offer a marketplace of ideas, pursuing profits in a natural process believed to support democracy. Libertarian theory sees the government as the primary if not only threat to press freedom. Perhaps the best known embodiment of the ideal is the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which specifies that "Congress shall make no law . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." This statement expresses the ideal in terms of freedom from state intervention.

The guiding principle is that the independent press, will represent diverse voices and hold government accountable. The only requirement however is that the press must ensure its own economic interests in the interest of Freedom of the Press. The Press which is not dependent on government dole outs in the form of state-sponsored advertisements can do a better job of holding the government accountable.

Observers and activists who perceive that a pure market orientation does not necessarily support democracy have argued that the press must instead assume social responsibility. In the 1947 Hutchins report, the U.S. Commission on a Free and Responsible Press conceived of the chief responsibilities as factual accuracy, promotion of open debate, representation of diverse views, and protection of individual rights by serving as a watchdog that guards against government abuses of power.

Any theory that the press has a voluntary duty to perform positive functions could belong in this category, but social responsibility theory, as originally described (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956), clearly upheld the U.S. journalistic ideal of objectivity which stresses factual (especially investigative) reporting over commentary, the balancing of opposing viewpoints, and maintaining a neutral observer role for the journalist (Schudson 2001). 8

This ideal has become dominant globally, even among journalists in countries where highly polarized political cultures make it difficult to put into practice (Hallin and Mancini 2004) 9
Social responsibility theory lacks any systematic critique of capitalist media ownership and funding (McQuail 2005). 10

Other democratic normative theories also concern social responsibilities, but emphasize some more than others. Legal scholars, philosophers and social scientists, rather than journalists, largely produced these theories, which may not share the assumption against state intervention as a legitimate means to orient journalism democratically.

The primary duties for the press are to chronicle accurately the range of competing elite perspectives, to examine the character and behavior of elected officials, and to monitor closely their activities for corruption or incompetence (the watchdog function). In other words, the press should adopt a critical, serious tone in covering public affairs, defined as the activities primarily of government but also, in principle, of business or other powerful social institutions.

In democratic participatory theory, journalism is called upon to promote actively the political involvement of citizens. The theory emphasizes principles such as popular inclusion, empowerment, and full expression through a range of communicative styles (Ferree et al. 2002;).11 Its theorists emphasize diverse viewpoints and active citizen involvement more than the quality of the discourse (whether reasoned, critical, serious, or the like). They disagree on the best means to achieve these goals. Tabloid forms of journalism for example, might provide a bridge leading formerly apathetic citizens to an interest in politics, or the mainstream press might provide news from more perspectives. In participatory theory, however, small-scale, segmented media, commercial as well as non-profit, are best for promoting grassroots citizen involvement.

German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989) combines concerns for the quality (reasoned, critical debate) with the quantity (broad representation and participation) of discourse. 12 However, public sphere theory, places the greatest emphasis on quality, narrowly conceived: the press should create a domination-free environment where the better argument can prevail in a quest for social consensus The public sphere should be free from the state as well as the market.

Public Service Broadcasting, for example, supported with legal guarantees of autonomy from political intervention like the Prasar Bharati Corporation in India may be the best embodiment of the ideal.

The ideal of public sphere theory inspired the U.S. movement among journalists to redefine their role from simply providing information to promoting reasoned and civil public debate among ordinary citizens.

Feminist scholars such as Nancy Fraser say that the ideal of reasoned-critical debate may embody masculine domination and that the ideal of social consensus may suppress ineradicable identity differences. Building on the motto, "the personal is political," postmodern theory gives prominence to personal narratives and emotion over abstract reason, celebrating grassroots media that facilitate the playful search for identity or the articulation of counter-hegemonic interests. A postmodernist ideal is also evident in Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone's (2001) critique of rationalized, modernist newspaper design form and the hegemonic aspiration of professionalized journalism to map the social world. Postmodern theory insists on a journalism open to the widest range of narrative styles and perspectives, especially those emerging from the margins of society. 13

Are normative theories of journalism necessary?

One promising alternative approach, complex democracy (Baker 2002), acknowledges the shortcomings of any type of news media in the face of diverse democratic purposes and seeks to encourage the greatest variety of journalistic practices.14 A working model includes multiple sectors (Curran 2000): a core sector of public service television, a supplementary private enterprise sector, a professional sector under the control of journalists, a civic sector that social organizations including political parties support, and a closely related sector of ideologically or culturally marginal media that operate in the market with partial subsidies from the state.

Conflict Reporting:

A conflict is defined as a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share. Disputants often frame the conflict in relatively simple (and often self-serving) terms. Very often the sides see the underlying causes as very different. Sometimes they don't even know what they are, as the conflict has gone on so long and become so embedded in the culture, that raw emotions: fear, humiliation, and anger overlie earlier substantive concerns. Conflict and change always go hand in hand. 15

Thus, conflict has dimensions ranging from difference of opinion, disagreement to violent fighting.

The following can be described as the broad reasons for conflict around the world.

Religious Fundamentalism: Elements of the Taliban conflict and those in Kosovo though complex in dimension had religious identities as an important element of conflict.

Ethnicity: Cultural, regional or ethnic identity is also at the root of conflict in diverse places including Africa and Northeast India.

Perceived sense of Injustice: A number of conflict zones in societies are led by people do not have access to democratic means of grievance redressal.

Historic grievances: Often fuelled by stories of what a particular section of the society had lost, or should have got attained rightfully.

Inequitable distribution of Resources: This is at the root of conflicts involving elements as diverse as ultra-leftists like the Marxists to the extreme Rightists. Resources of Land/Oil/Water/Mineral/technology and knowledge are sought to be distributed more equitably.

Ross Howard defines two types of violence apart from the violent physical conflict. 16

Cultural Violence can be the way a group has been thinking about another groups for many years. It can include talk, images, or beliefs which glorify physical violence. These include:

Hate Speech: Different ethnic or cultural groups openly speak badly of each other. One group blames the other for difficulties or problems it is suffering. Violence is encouraged to eliminate the blamed group.

Xenophobia: A people's or a country's hatred or fear of another country creates misperceptions and encourages policies which promote conflict with that country.

Myths and Legends of War Heroes: A society whose popular songs and history books glorify one side's ancient victories can build hatred for the other side.

Religious justifications for War: Extreme intolerance of other beliefs promotes conflict.

Gender Discrimination: To allow practices and laws against women that are not accepted against men is a form of violence.

Structural Violence is harm which is built into the laws and traditional behaviour of a group or society. Harm is permitted or ignored. It can include:

Institutional Racism or Sexism: Laws and practices which allow unequal treatment based on race or sex.

Colonialism: A country's lack of self-determination. A foreign authority forcible assumes control over all important decision-making processes.

Extreme Exploitation: Such as slavery

Poverty: The world's leading cause of violent conflict.

Corruption and Nepotism: Governmental decisions are influenced or decided by bribery, favouritism and family or tribal connections.

Structural segregation: Laws which force people to live in separate groups or places against their will.

Use of language. How do we describe the parties involved in a conflict. Many agencies do not allow the use of the word "terrorist" in a conflict. Others deliberately use phrases like "Freedom Fighters have been martyred."

Facts, perceptions, assumptions: Are we basing our stories on facts? Are we guided by our own perceptions and assumptions or facts? 17

Conflict Resolution Model:

Classically, journalists are expected to be dispassionate observers. He is expected to remain equidistant from the various sides involved in a conflict. However in view of the complexities that frames a conflict, journalists covering the conflict have to perform the role of the mediator. The Conflict-Resolution Model that this paper discusses posits the journalists to perform the following functions:

1. Inform -The media is the only source of communication even to the sides involved in a conflict. Often these sides speak to each other through the media or through specific journalists. The primary duty of the journalist is to provide rounded information encouraging proper balance between conflicting reports from the sides involved in the conflict.

2. Analyse- Each side needs to know about the other's difficulty in moving towards resolution. In an objective appraisal of the events the journalist has to discuss the elements of background, significance and context in analysing the various developments during a crisis.

3. Help in bringing back normalcy- The first step to complete resolution is to build an atmosphere of trust. The journalist has to dig dip into the issues so that there are no secret fears. Also it is important for journalists to bring the human face into the conflict. Putting real people into the story and describing how the ongoing

issues affect them goes a long way into bringing back normalcy.

Often it is through omission that journalists add to the conflict, unwittingly. The must provide an outlet for both parties to air their views. If the media platform is provided to the various sides, they often do not have to take to the streets. But this has to be handled extremely sensitively.

4. Help resolving the conflict- Focus the attention of the international community on a developing conflict, and by doing so bring pressure on the parties to re-solve it or on the international community to intervene. The journalist through his reports can actively engage in confidence building measures. Stories of hope need wide coverage.

There are four theoretical ways in which a conflict can finally reach a conclusion. However every conclusion does not necessarily mean a resolution and can lead to another cycle of conflict.

a) One party prevails either in a violent conflagration or through a negotiated settlement.

b) One of the party withdraws from the conflict, does nothing or is annihilated

c) Both parties leave their extreme positions to arrive to the middle ground. This is one of the useful ways of reaching a compromise.

d) Involving the larger community — at times the international community and providing a larger per-spective to the problem. Involving more parties in the conflict resolution leads to greater permanence of the settlement.

The above objective points to three important posi-tions. Firstly that resources can be shared where the source of the conflict is inequitable distribution. Sec-ondly when the larger community is involved there is lesser possibility of the use of violence.

As Peter McIntyre writes, "Journalists also need to understand how inflammatory journalism and poor standards of reporting can have consequences for all journalists by souring relations with local groups and institutions. People who target the media with violence do not distinguish between 'good' or 'bad' journalists; they hit out at those they can reach. All journalists have a physical stake in high standards and objective report-ing, even if this alone will not guarantee safety."

Recent Regulations on Conflict Reporting in India

India's broadcasters have adopted sweeping guidelines covering reporting. The regulations, agreed to by the Indian National Broadcasters Association, cover the gamut from accuracy to sting operations. But the sec-tion receiving the most attention deals with coverage of national security operations.

Although the association was already working on new guidelines before November's terrorist attack on Mum-bai, criticism of the live broadcast coverage of the 60-hour siege added pressure for India's commercial tele-vision news outlets to tone things down.

Retired Indian Chief Justice Jagdish Saran Verma is chairman of the association's ethics and standards au-thority, which drafted the regulations. In an interview to Voice of America in December 208 he said: "There should not be any need for any further regulation," he said. "Self-regulation by the broadcasters, based on these guidelines, will be sufficient."

The new broadcasters' code says live interviews with terror suspects should not be aired and broadcasters should not disclose details of ongoing operations in-volving national security.

During the Mumbai attack, blamed on Pakistani ter-rorists, Indian government officials severely criticized broadcasters for live coverage allegedly revealing com-mando positions to the gunmen inside seized luxury hotels. One channel aired a telephone interview with a hostage taker.

Following the terror siege in India's commercial capi-tal, critics in the media and government here widely condemned the around-the-clock coverage for airing unconfirmed rumors that nearly provoked panic - show-ing gory scenes, as well as sensationalistic rhetoric and military music.

That prompted India's Parliament to begin consider-ing establishment of a regulatory agency for the mush-rooming number of private news channels. Some TV journalists have defended their coverage, saying the government provided little real-time information and that they face too much competitive pressure in a 24-hour working environment.18

An example of Internet War during the Kosovo conflict:

CNN Web sites said they served a record number of viewers in the week following the start of the NATO bombing in 1999. The CNN sites, which include CNN.

com, CNNfn.com, and Allpolitics.com, said they'd served 578 million page impressions (page views) in March, double the traffic a year ago.

Traffic on CNN.com from Macedonia was up 1025%, Croatian traffic was up 946%, Slovenian traffic was up 797% and traffic from Bosnia-Herzegovina was up 570%.

The Net, said The New York Times, had become an alternative source for news-hungry Americans. The war, said Michael Kinsley, editor of the online magazine Slate, "shows the difference the Web can make. "Unless they shut down the whole telephone system, they can't stop information from getting out, or getting back in."

The phenomenon of the Internet war, was widespread. If the war in Kosovo demonstrates anything about the Net, it shows that it cannot be controlled during a war.

This was a New York Times and Washington Post and Times of London and CNN story, a military-strategy, policy-and-politics story perfectly suited for journalism in its traditional incarnation — TV networks and reporters stationed in world capitals. It was conventional, not digital media, that reported on Serbian strategy, that captured the scope of the assaults on Kosovar villages, that reported on the progress (or lack thereof) of NATO bombers.

Like most modern wars, this one was fought at least as much on TV as on battlefields. Three images shaped the Kosovo conflict from the beginning: bombs hurtling toward targets; the three beaten and bruised American soldiers, and the streams of battered refugees pouring into Albania and Macedonia.

The anonymous correspondents, monks and teens filing reports via various Web sites were interesting, sometimes even revealing. So were the facts, history and statistics available on the Web sites maintained by conventional media like CNN, The Washington Post and USA TODAY.

CNN allows all the principals in global conflicts to see the same images and statements at the same time. Bob Dole went on "Larry King Live" to warn Slobodan Milosevic that he was running out of time. And Milosevic or some close aide was almost certainly watching.

Anonymous Net posters are interesting, sometimes even important. But their role is, by definition, limited.

They have little credibility precisely because nobody knows who they are. For all their faults, journalists are accountable for the things they report. And they are accountable for evaluating and describing the people they quote. There is simply no way to evaluate the accuracy or perception of e-mailers, especially anonymous ones.

It's a good thing Internet correspondents don't shape policy, as the potential for abuse is staggering. The Serbian hackers who knocked out the NATO Web site could fake electronic identities in a second. Many could fake e-mail messages too.

Nobody airing an anonymous Balkan report delivered online can vouch with absolutely certainty for its accuracy, or take the source, identity and content at face value. The widepread use by journalism of unknown e-mail correspondents would make the recent scandals and controversies at The New Republic, The Boston Globe and other newspapers seem positively trivial.

But the world, especially the journalistic one, still can't get used to the idea of the Internet. It's continuously either denounced as a plague or hyped to the skies.

But Kosovo is no Internet War. It's all too typical a one - brutal, tragic and incomprehensible. Technology is about human beings, not machines. There's nothing digital about the days and nights of the captured American soldiers, the people who live in bomb-torn Belgrade, or the hundreds of thousands of refugees streaming out of Kosovo. 20

The Conflict Resolution Theory thus in a sense falls between the realm of the democratic and non democratic theories.

There are important areas of divergence between the other normative theories. The Conflict Resolution theory is not Authoritarian since it does not give the state the right to be the only legitimate voice during a conflict. It does not follow the Libertarian ideals and often it is not just accuracy, objectivity and balance that is the guiding principle for communicators. Often certain factual elements are downplayed for the sake of diluting a potential crisis.

It needs to be emphasised that the media does not just remain a vehicle of State opinion. In other normative theories, the journalist remains a passive agent. This is also true of Development theories and Social Responsibility theory. However even Social Responsibil-

ity theory is regarded as somewhat authoritarian where the press is supposed to support the efforts of a welfare state.

The Conflict Resolution Theory however believes that often the State might be one of the sides in a conflict. However the legitimacy of the conflict is an issue that has to be looked into.

The Conflict Resolution Theory thus hypothesizes that the media first looks into the background for the conflict. It also provides a prescriptive regime for the media as follows:

Avoid Reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find others affected by the standoff. These could include students, businessmen, workers, tour operators etc whose normal life is affected by the conflict.

Avoid an elitist approach of only attributing statements to top leaders. Many of them would be repeating oft repeated phrases anyway.

Reporting on common interests and things that do not divide the conflicting sides can also be an integral part of CRT. An approach should be made to arrive to reveal the common ground between the various sides. Reports should also avoid portraying the suffering of only one side. Human suffering — irrespective of affiliations — is anyway newsworthy.

Use of adjectives and adverbs that border on subjectivity has to be avoided. Value neutral words have to be chosen at all times. Words like tragedy, devastation, exploitation are loaded and puts the reporters on one side. However such words can be used when they are attributed. But even then care has to be taken as not to hurt sensibilities.

Emotional words or imageries should not be used even when a human interest story is reported. It adds to the problem.

Technical words like Genocide, Terrorism, Extremism, Fanaticism, Assassination, Persecution should be used only in cases where they precisely define the situation. There are subtle undertones in each of these words and may appear insensitive in many cases.

Avoid making an opinion into a fact.

Avoid waiting for leaders to come up with solutions. The peace ideas can come from the masses themselves. Journalists can explore these ideas when they find them feasible.

References:

1. Bryant, J., & Miron, D., (2004) Theory and Research in Mass Communication: Journal of Communication, December, 662-704.

2. Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J., (1997) Two decades of Cultivation Research: An appraisal and meta-analysis. Communication Yearbook, 20, 1-45.

3. Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D.R. (1987). News that Matters: Television and American opinion. Chicago, University of Chicago.

4. Romer, D., Jamieson, K.H., & Aday, S., (2003) Television News and the Cultivation of Fear of Crime, Journal of Communication, March, 88-104.

5. Siebert, F., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). Four Theories of the Press. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

6. Schramm, W. (1964). Mass Media and National Development. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

7. MacBride, S. et al. (1980). Many Voices, One World. Report by International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. Paris: UNESCO.

8. Schudson, M. (2001). "The objectivity norm in American journalism." Journalism 2(2): 149-170.

9. Hallin, D. & Mancini, P. (2004). Comparing Media Systems. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10. McQuail, D. (2005). Mass Communication Theory. London: Sage.

11. Ferree, M.M., Gamson, W., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12. Habermas, J. (1989). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

13. Barnhurst, K. & Nerone, J. (2001). The Form of News: A History. New York: The Guilford Press.

14. Baker, C.E. (2002). Media, Markets and Democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

15. Based on an interview the author had with Fox News, Pakistan correspondent Scott Heidler.

16. Howard, R., (2003). Conflict Sensitive Journalism, Denmark: IMPACS.

17. Based on an interaction with Prof Mrinal Chatterjee, Professor, Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

18. Voice of America Broadcast in December 2008.

19. www.nbanewdelhi.com

20. http://www.dmoz.org/News/Media/Journalism/Issues/Conflict_Reporting/