

Communication theories in the age of new media technology : A critical analysis

Key words :

Communication theories, new media technology, relevance, analysis.

The impact of new media technology can be seen in all dimensions of life. It is also changing the earlier theories and concepts given in reference to various subjects. In this research paper, the researcher has tried to analyse the applicability of communication theories in reference to new media information and communication technology.

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Media or communication theory can be defined a subdivision of knowledge. It is basically the study of principle and method through which information is passed on. (Oxford living dictionary) The study of communication and mass media has lead to development of many theories and many of these theories have emerged in developed countries especially in U.S.A. But some of these theories have been given by the experts of western countries also.

All these media theories have their own utilities and significance even today. Despite to this fact that communication theories have been given several years before and specially during 1940 to 1980, their relevancy and utility can be seen even today in many ways. They are basis of explaining the behaviour of social and psychological implication of mass media. Most of the findings of the trends, behaviours and effects in reference to media can be justified even today in many ways.

Several kinds of new media technology have developed in recent decades. Now the mode of communication has significantly changed in many ways in different dimensions. New media technologies have become an inseparable part in everyone's life of communication. They have their own characteristics which were hardly found in earlier media. They are in digital form, virtual, interactive, fast and global. (Martin Lister / Jon Dovey / Seth Giddings / Iain Grant / Kieran Kelly, 2009) It will be interesting to see the relevance of communication theories in the fusion of various new, traditional and old forms of media. They are creating a very different frame of communication. Most of these theories given were in reference to traditional media and the technology of new media was not available at that time. Now the analysis and evaluation of these theories are going on and they are being evaluated in reference to new media technology.(Matthew Nisbet, 2013)

Objectives- The main objective of this

study is to discuss and analyse the relevance of communication theories in the present scenario and evaluate their utility in reference to new media technology. This analytical research article will try to review some well known communication theories which have always been a matter of debate in the World of mass media.

New media – New media have been defined in various ways. According to webopedia- New media is used to describe content made available using different forms of electronic communication made possible through the use of computer technology. Generally, the phrase new media describes content available on-demand through the Internet (webopedia 2017). In this way, websites and blogs, streaming audio and video, chat rooms, e-mail, online communities, social media and sharing platforms, mobile apps, Web advertising, DVD and CD-ROM media, virtual reality environments, integration of digital data with the telephone, such as Internet telephony digital cameras may be described to new media. These channels of communications have far reaching implications for society. (Brian Neese, 2015).

Media have always affected in their own ways.

Literature review – Various media theories have been analysed from time to time and the theories given by one media scholars have been analysed and reviewed by another and they have either been extended or moderated or criticised and some times even rejected according to their own perception and experiences. However, such studies were done mainly in the same frame of references in which the proponents of the theories have given them. Now the question is being raised about the validity of media theory in reference to new media. Sorin Adam Matel raises this question in his article. He thinks that social media tells us a lot about use and gratification theory. He says that there are several theories

which explain the impact of mass media upon society. But the validity of these theories has to be verified. It is necessary as the style of functioning of mass media is changing due to social media. Now it is important to see if various popular and well known theories, including knowledge gap, agenda settings and media dependency, are still relevant. Sorin Adam Matel scrutinizes this issue in detail. (Sorin Adam Matel, 2010)

The behaviour of people and trend of media have also been important areas of study and this has resulted in the development of various media theories. Many of these theories were studied in reference to one kind of media and later on that was expanded to other form of media also.

Method of analysis – There are a large number of communication theories. In this study, only important and popular communication theories have been taken for the discussion and analysis. Initially the basic concept of the theories have been discussed and after explaining it, the theory has been analysed keeping in view the use and application of various new media technology. Observation and Secondary sources of information have been used for the analysis.

Analysis of various theories : When we study media theory, we find a long list of several such theories that have been given from time to time. But due to limitation of the study, only important and well known theories have been given here one by one.

Bullet theory – One of the earliest theories given by media scholar is bullet theory. It is also known as hypodermic needle model or magic bullet theory. This theory considers message as a bullet which is fired from media-gun into viewers mind. The “Magic Bullet” theory graphically assumes that the media’s message is a bullet fired from the “media gun” into the viewer’s “head”. (Arthur Asa, 1995). It injects the message into the passive mind of audiences and they accept it in the same form. They cannot escape from the influences of messages of media and they are vulnerable to these messages. This theory was given mainly

during 1930s. However, it has always been even challenged by various media scholars. The study done by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet led to think about it and they gave a modification of the magic bullet theory called the Two Step Flow theory. (Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, Hazel Gaudet, 1944)

Present scenario - The basis of bullet theory is the limited number of information sources and passive behaviour of audiences. It says that media messages are taken directly by audiences in its original form without any change and moderation. This concept might be true when this theory was presented during the decades of 30s and 40s of the last century. The bullet theory was very popular during this period. But present scene is quite different. Now new media have provided various sources of information. People’s sources of information are continuously increasing and they have direct access to any kind of information at any time. (Keith N. Hampton, Chul-joo Lee, Eun Ja Her, 2011)

In such cases, the bullet theory may hold true only in those cases where the access of people is very small for any particular information. Now, with easy availability of participatory and interactive media, the boundary between audience and content creators are becoming blurred and they are not very clear. Now the contents are in conversational style instead of being shot from one source to mass in unidirectional way. So the relevancy of bullet theory may hold true only in exceptional cases, but it cannot be true in all cases and at all time. However, on some occasions, the basic concept of bullet theory seems to be effective. We often see that any message given on social media is taken for granted and it is continuously forwarded to a large number of people believing it to be true and people react on it accordingly. In-fact, some media scholars still quote the bullet theory to explain why certain audiences must not be exposed to certain media content as they fear that if they watch or read, then they would act negatively. (Anders Olof Larsson, 2011)

Agenda setting theory - Agenda setting theory was given by Maxwell Mc Comb and Donald L. Shaw in 1973. Several points have been presented in the background to Agenda Setting Theory by various scholars. This theory says that the order of presentation of news affects the audience opinion about the importance of events. They give more importance to those subjects which are presented by media and rank their importance according to the order of presentation. The subject of debate in it is determined by media at first level. Again, at second level, media also influence how people should think about. Though the original theory has not mentioned this point. In fact, the gate keeping is the main concept behind this theory. Now days we see that some stories are shown throughout the day and it seems that this is the most important issue of society. Such types of perception may be created with more effect.

Present scenario –Media have more tools to enrich the content and effective presentation of any subject. However, it is also said that such effect is weakened for those people who have made their mind and also it is weak if the credibility of media is doubtful and people may not pay attention on it. Media cannot totally change all environments. At present, there is a lot of subjects which are being given or injected in the mind of people. Social media have their own contents which they continuously present. In such cases, it is not possible for traditional media to maintain the monopoly on the subject of discussion among public in the society. Now gate keeping function of media is no more. Any person can get information according his own choice. Now there is also no imposition of subject on audience. (Ciacu Grasu Nicoleta 2008_) So the agenda setting theory is true in exceptional cases when various mass media collectively give any particular content with some intention. But nowadays media are also blamed for playing the role of agenda setting in the society (Arun Jaitley, 2016). However, there are some people who favours the agenda setting role of media in the interest of society.(Shekhar

Gupta, 2011))

Use and gratification theory – In short, Use and gratification theory is called UGT. This theory is audience centered approach to know the behaviour of mass communication. It is a move to understanding why and how people seek specific media to satisfy or please their needs. It takes the question why do people use media and what do they use them for. The basic concept of this theory is that audiences are not very passive and they play a very active role about the selection of media and the content of media. It means, media and their content cannot be imposed on them.They are responsible for the selection of media and also the time and the content of it. (David Chaney, 1972)

Present scenario – This theory was given at that time when the choice of media was very limited before the audience and they had very small access to the content of media. Yet they were not passive audience and they were selective in their way. Now the situation has very much changed and audiences' freedom of choice of content have widened at various level in multidimensional manner. So they are more prone to select that content of media at micro level. The availability of new media technology has facilitated them to satisfy themselves through the various kinds of media contents. Several studies have been done about the use of various social media and they have shown that people use media to gratify themselves. Several benefits have been described (Curtis Forman, 2017). People use social media and various other new media to gratify themselves. So we can say that this theory is more relevant today than before and the application of this theory can further be increased. The study and article also supports this view.(Thomas E. Ruggiero , 2000)

Dependency theory – Dependency theory may be described to be extension of use and gratification theory. This theory was presented by American media research scholar Sandra Ball Rokeach and Melvin De Fleure in 1976. This

theory suggests that media and audience should be studied in the context of larger social system. When we talk about the effect of media, we should focus our attention on interrelation of media, social system and individual. The basic concept of this theory is that the importance of any media in the life of a person is according to the need that is fulfilled by the media. It means that the more a person depends on media to meet his need, the more important will be media in his life and accordingly will have more effect in his life.

Present scenario – Now if we see current scenario, there are several website besides different TV programme, which provides various such contents which are more and more interactive and they associate people to fulfill their needs. The websites of different information are available and people see these programme and they even practice it. Nowadays micro level dependency is continuously increasing. It is due to the fact that there are several types of media and each of them are fulfilling the need of different sections of society. People go to websites for different types of small information of their daily lives and these new media technologies are fulfilling various types of information requirements of people at individual level. So the dependency theory is more relevant today than before. Now people are more dependent on new media for different information. (Jedziel Hernandez, 2016). But the hard competition for getting more and more likes by visitors make the site owners to do hard work to attract them. Those who are not able to do this may no longer remain useful for them.

Silence theory – This theory was originally proposed by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle Neumann in 1974. This theory suggests that people remain silent when they feel that their views are opposite to the views of majority of people on any subject. This is done by them for the fear of isolation and to avoid any other kinds of problem and controversies. Such types of theory was very relevant in those days as the people in minority opinion were not in position to

defend them before the big media power. (Serajul I. Bhuiyan 2006). There are several cases in which person faced various problems after expressing his or her views which was different from the view of majority.

Present scenario - Nowadays new media has provided several platforms for expressing views and people use them vehemently. Internet leveled the ground where all people can voice their opinion and people with minority opinion cannot feel themselves to be in minority and they are very vocal in expressing their opinion at global level. There are several platforms for all sections of society from where they can disseminate their ideas and opinion on any issue.

In fact new media technology has increased the chances of expression of those people who were thought to be holding views in minority. The numbers of such persons who are having different opinion on any issue are also increasing and now they are more vocal in expressing their opinion. So people have more opportunities today than before to express their views. It can be said that the theory of Silence is true only to a certain level and minority views are not silent but they are given from different media, though it may not be necessary that they are always given from traditional main stream media. However, the professionalism in mass media has also made them to give views of all sections of society without any discrimination. But social media have become a big platform of freedom of expression. (Bristolpen, 2016). But this theory may be useful in some underdeveloped countries where digital divide problem is more prominent.

Cultivation theory – This theory was given by George Gerbner. The research regarding this theory began in mid 1960s. The main objective of the study was to find if TV viewing influences the audience idea and perception of everyday life. It believes that TV viewing can have long term effect and its audiences are affected gradually. It primarily focuses on the effects in the attitude of the viewers rather than the behavior. It found that

TV is more susceptible to media message. It also proposed the viewers in various categories on the basis of time of exposure to media given by them. TV may create a mean world syndrome, a belief that a world is far worse and dangerous than it actually is. George Gerbner's theory has even been very much criticized even those days. There are several doubts about the mode of its application. This study was done mainly in reference to TV viewing. The studies were done later on by other media scholars also. (James Shanahan, Michael Morgan, 1999)

Present scenario – The shaping of public opinion is one important function of mass media. Nowadays various types of mass media have emerged. So this process of making public opinion still exists today and many people depends mainly on media for making their opinion about various issues to a great extent. But there are so much contradictory report about any subject that it is not possible for a channel to leave its effect for a long time. However, with expansion of time, this theory has been expanded and is applied to various areas. The effect of social media in developing attitude and culture can be seen in our day today life. (Frank Furedi, 2012)

Cumulative Effects Theory - German social scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann is main proponent of this theory. According to this theory, the persuasive campaign can be more effective when messages are given from different sources and they are repeated from the same sources over a period of time. For example, if a person gets a message about water conservation from radio while travelling, he may ignore it. But if he hears it again form TV and next day in newspaper and reads a big hoarding and then gets sms on mobile about it, he may become serious about it. So in order to make a message effective, it should be given from combination of various channels and it should be repeated.

Present scenario – New media have provided greater opportunity for cumulative effect. They have just expanded the spectrum of

channels and content and people are continuously exposed about current issues .In such cases, it is not possible for a audience to avoid the effect of new media if it has been used in a very systematic manner.

Framing theory – This theory was first put by Goffman and may be related with Agenda setting theory as both focus on how media describe particular subject before public. Framing is a way source of communication defines, constructs and delivers any piece of information. It is very natural and all of us communicate in our frames. The basis of this theory is that media focus attention on certain subject and then position it in a certain style to make people think in a particular manner. The important concept of this theory is that how something is presented before the audience influences the choice of people make about how to process information. In this way, this theory makes audience about how to think.

Present scenario – There are several factors which play very major role in framing any information. But nowadays the presentation of information has become more strategic and calculated. The media content is given keeping in view the time, place and interest of the people. Nowadays information is directly sent to individual keeping in view his interest and choice. So the wishes of audiences are more important in contradictory to the intention of media source. However, with the increasing number of facilities for message framing and manipulation, there is no doubt that the framing opportunities have further increased. Not only this, now the media have become more professional and they are manipulating the messages in a more strategic manner with help of new media. So we can say that the framing theory has become more relevant today.

Gate keeping theory – This theory was given by German scholar Zedek Lewin. He coined the word Gate Keeping. Earlier this word was used in the field of psychology but later it was used in communication and became an important theory

of communication. According to this theory, the gatekeeper decides what kinds of information should flow in the society. The gatekeeper is having his own influence in the selection of news. In the routine duty, the gate keeping is done by editor. He decides what kinds of information should be sent and which should be not sent. There are several factors which determine the flow of news .The news offices receive various news stories from different sources and all of them cannot be given due to different limitations. (Ciacu Grasu Nicoleta , 2008)

Present scenario – In the present scenario, the gate keeping theory exists in a more professional and dynamic manner. There are several examples in which the new media organizations are very selective in the matter of giving news of various events. At the same time, news organizations are facing big challenges from social media and various other forms of new media. Now there is no monopoly of media people on giving news and other types of material and they can no longer control the dissemination of news in their own way. So the gate keeping processes by big media have greatly been diffused by new media. They have their own sources of various news and the game of gate keeping have no effect on them. Many times, the audiences get news from various social media ahead of its transmission from different mass media.

Medium Theory– Medium is the message. This famous statement was given by Marshal McLuhan. He was a strong supporter of power of medium through which message is given and which gives a particular shape to the message. The basic assumption of the theory is that media is not just a means for communication but they create different set of environment which facilitates communication to happen and also may change the meaning and sense of information. It means same information can have slightly different meaning if different types of media are used for it. The feature of different media also affects the sense of meaning. In this reference,

radio, TV, Print and web media can be sited. If news is given through radio, TV, print and web media, all of these will have different affect on the audiences.

Present scenario – The new media is another important medium of communication. It has more tools and functions for framing any information in a particular shape. For example, new media has interactive system and several other kinds of facility. This theory is very relevant today and it can be used for proper designing of messages. Now new media technology is easily available to a large section of society and the feature of each media technology determines the efficiency of communication. A further research in this area is very important and relevant and that can be done in reference to various new media technologies.

Knowledge gap theory – This theory was proposed first time in 1970 by Philip J Tichenor and others. According to this theory , “As the infusion of mass media information into social system increases, higher the socio economic status segment tend to acquire this information faster than lower socioeconomic segment status population segments so that gap in knowledge between two tends to increase rather than decrease.”(Communication theory.org/knowledge)

Present scenario – The emergence of new media technologies have created digital division in the society. Digital divide basically describes the gap in term of access to and usage of new media technology. The smart phone has given access to maximum number of people and all have access to various types of information. But still two types of problem exist today. The first one is the availability of new technology and the second one is the facility. All people do not have equal chance to access detail information. The process of advancement of new media continues, so the knowledge gap may continue in different level in different forms. The skill of use of technology is also widening which is providing different opportunity to different people. The digital division

is continuously increasing in many directions. (Laura Robinson, Shelia R. Cotten, Hiroshi Ono, Anabel Quan-Haase, Gustavo Mesch, Wenhong Chen, Jeremy Schulz, Timothy M. Hale & Michael J. Stern, 2015)

Individual difference theory – It is another important theory of mass communication which says that individual responds differently to the mass media in all the ways. It also says that individual consumes mass media differently to satisfy their needs. The need may be for information, integrative or escapist or some other thing. It is due to their different attitude, culture and personality.

Present scenario – In modern age, everyone has smart mobile, tablet and likewise other such equipments with which one can easily access various type of information according to his psychology and needs and satisfaction. This tendency has enhanced due to new media technology which have further increased their freedom of selection of contents. The choice of selection of various contents and formats of programmes has increased.

Cognitive Dissonance - This theory was presented by Leon Festinger in 1950s. According to this theory, media cannot be considered to be very powerful once thought to be so. The main reason behind it is that the audiences ignore those messages which are inconsistent to previously held belief and opinion. The readers normally read or hear the stories on the basis of the headlines and they pay attention to those stories which they expect to agree and ignore those which are against their belief.

Present scenario – This is a very normal psychology found in human and one of the strongest characteristics of human behavior that is resistance to change. But the continuous exposure of various messages may effect in one or other way. The new media provide people opportunities to see various kinds of programmes in which they can see even those contents which are not in consistence to their belief and opinion.

So despite their resistance, they are not in position to avoid them.

Kant's Reinforcement Theory - This theory was presented in by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1800s to describe how individuals were influenced to change their behaviors. This theory is also known as limited effect theory. It is also presented by Joseph Klapper as phenomenistic theory.(Klapper,1960) This theory says that a behaviour is likely to be repeated if the desired behavior is rewarded or reinforced positively. But the reverse was not found to be equally true and people try to avoid the punishment.

Present scenario – Various studies about the effect of mass media have been done and they have proved that new media can become a source of social movement and change and it is quite impossible for a person in the age of new media to keep oneself aloof from all side remaining unaffected in all the way. New media is gradually becoming a tool of change at various levels. (Clark, Eric. 2012)

There are several other theories which are given in reference to the process of communication. Some theories are given in reference to interpersonal communication. For example, Uncertainty reduction theory, social interaction theory, symbolic interaction theory, relational dialectic theory, coordinated management theory, social penetration theory relational pattern of interaction theory, Onion theory and others such theories relate mainly with interpersonal communication.

Conclusions – Many of these theories are independent from the channel of mass communication. So they are not affected with the emergence of new media. However, the social implications of new media have affected the all dimensions of life at various levels of communication accordingly. Due to limitation of this study, these theories have not been analysed in reference to new media technology, but they are certainly affecting even various other theories

given in reference to communication. From the above analysis, we can draw some important conclusions. Communication theories plays a very basic role in explaining the behavior of mass media in the society. There are so many differences in the structure and functioning of the society that one theory may not be applied uniformly in all society and all time even in reference to new media technology.

- Most of the communication theories have their same relevance even today, as it was earlier.

- Some communication theories have become more relevant than before in reference to new media.

-New media require some new types of theories where their behaviour, impact and people's interaction can effectively be justified.

Limitations of study- The analysis of various theories has been done to a certain level and a further micro level analysis of these theories may more clear picture of relevancy of communication theories in reference to

Suggestions for further study-

Followings are some other areas where further study can be done.

1- This study can be done for communication model also in reference to new media.

2- There is need to develop new communication theory in reference to new media technology.

3- Other communication theories can also be analysed in reference to new media.

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