

What is theory? Why does theory matters? What does it do for us?

Scholars and theorists have defined theories in varied ways and every different definition implies how theory can do wonders for us. Theories have been defined as “set of interrelated propositions” (Hoover, 1984), “set of systematic hunches” (Burgoon, 2012) “set of systematic generalization” (Severin & Tankard Jnr., 1982) “set of ideas” (McQuial, 1983). These systematic concepts, notion or ideas explain, understand and predict events, phenomenon and situations (Hoover, 1984, McQuial, 1983, Garrison, 2000). Kerlinger (1979) defines a theory as “a set of interrelated constructs (variables), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining natural phenomena” (p. 64). There are so many theories in the fields of social sciences but sometimes it becomes very difficult to give a strong theory because of lack of consensus on the definition of theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

So, theories are an organized effort to look at the things happening around us. Theories explains what, how, why and who, where, whenof any given situation (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, Markus, 2002, Whetten, 1989). But this explanation through an orderly activity always requires a scientific way of reaching at the conclusions drawn from a long list of empirical observations (Severin & Tankard Jnr., 1982). This methodical approach is the reason that Wilbur Schramm (1963) describes theories as “crap-detector” and they help differentiate between scientific and unscientific assumptions.

We see the world around us and observe realities in it. Theories make sense out of all this as they bring an order and direction both in what we are seeing and which creates confusions (Kaplan, 1963). For scholars and researchers theories are like currency even if they seem to be

uncertain (Hambrick, 2007). They serve as a map also which guide us for future endeavors in research and practice both (Bernath and Vidal, 2007).

Some scholars consider theory different from practice and they see this as a limitation of theory but importance of theory is inevitable in practical world as they help in the growth of any field and define its practicalities (Wacker, 1998). Theories are the heart of research and research is the building block of any profession or field (Thompson, 2000). Theories in social sciences cannot be generalized universally as scientific laws (Turner, n.d.). But they provide explanation of human behaviors and ultimately suggest ways to change them (Glanz, n.d.). Thus theory offers explanation of human state and means for improvement.

Otto Peters during a session at a workshop categorizes theories into descriptive, explanatory, analytical, predictive and prescriptive (Bernath & Vidal, 2007). All these different types are indicative of different functions a theory can perform. Theories are not only for explanation and prediction but they are prescriptive in nature so give solutions as well. These solutions are for both researchers and practitioners. Thus scope of theories range from an individual to the society at large, within this sphere they improve existing knowledge, erase the doubts and uncertainties of the present literature available and provide a starting point to us.

As compared to practice, theory deals with thinking and philosophy. It can be a hypothesis that may be followed and tested. It may have capacity to enhance knowledge in particular fields as developing explanation. It may be scientific and part of normal science (Thomas, 1997).

It helps researchers and professionals to find out the answers of questions and clarify the nature of people's behaviors. In quantitative research, a theory becomes the main framework for the whole study. Questions or hypotheses are designed according to that theory then that are

examined to test the theory rather than developing a new one. In this way, theory may be verified or extended through deductive approach. On the other hand, a theory can also be used in qualitative researches for different purposes using inductive approach. First, it can be applied just like in quantitative research. Target audience, questions or hypothesis are defined according to the explanation of the theory. Second, a new theory can also be formed using qualitative research. In mixed methods research, theories can be both tested or generated (Creswell, 2009).

Neuman (2000) divides theories into three categories: Micro-level, Macro-level and Meso-level theories. Micro-level theory is about small numbers of people and timeframe. That is not abstract in nature, for instance theory of Goffman (1967) describes face-to-face interaction of people in rituals. Macro-level theory deals with larger aggregates including social institutions, cultural systems or societies. That uses abstract concepts, such as theory of Lenski (1966) which describes inequality among societies. Meso-level theory is usually rare. It is at intermediate level including organisations, social movements or communities, for example, Collins (1988) theory of control in organization. According to the requirements, theorists or researcher can select a theory to study a particular phenomenon.

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Q 2) Why should you learn theories like agenda setting, uses and gratifications, political economy of mass media, information society and so forth?

Human beings have passed through six information revolutions so far: 1st after the introduction of writing, started from Greece almost 8th century BC, 2nd after invention of printing press in 1450 by Guttenberg which turned world into Guttenberg Galaxy (McLuhan, 1962), 3rd revolution of Mass media in the middle of 19th century, 4th revolution of entertainment at the end of 19th century when entertainment became accessible to people, 5th revolution of communication toolshed home in the middle of 20th century in which homes of common people became hub of communication and entertainment tools and last 6th revolution of Information highway with convergence of technologies (Fang, 1997) and rise of Prosumerism (Ritzer &Jurgenson, 2010).

When we look at all these information revolutions in human history we come to know the significance of communication particularly mass and mediated communications and their penetration in human life. Because of this significance mass communication has been developed into an academic field and it has been studied and researched in three different aspects, it is studied for learning skills of communication practice, and then it is researched empirically and studied critically and culturally as mass media (Chafee & Metzger, 2001). Mass Communication theory has been evolved as an outcome of mass communication into an academic field. Communication theory has been inclusive and multidisciplinary taking many contributions ranging from literature, political science, psychology, sociology and even mathematics also and this is why communication theory is rich in its content and diverse in its approach (Craig, 1999).

For the researchers of mass communication it is very important to know all the traditions and approaches of its theory. Some scholars divide mass communication theory into paradigms (Hall, 1982, Lowery &DeFleur, 1988), some deal with collection of issues (McQuail, 2013) while some discuss the chronological order of mass communication research and theory (Baran&

Davis 2009) and some discuss traditions of mass communication theory as “metadiscursive model” (Craig, 1999). These paradigms, traditions and approaches are replete with different theories. These theories study effects of media, power of media in shaping behaviors of people, reception of audience, politics and power structures and their connection with citizens through media, content and organizational structures of media. Learning of all these issues and theories related to them will give a theoretical and conceptual background to the students of mass communication theory and novice researchers for generating new theories and for practitioners developing new set of knowledge.

Theories and theoretical knowledge can help practitioners. Like, among seven tradition suggested by Craig (1999) semiotic is the study of signs, symbols, languages and their respective use in communicating message. Learning this theory and knowing semiotic cues can lead TV, film producers and advertisement experts towards more convincing and appealing texts accordingly. In the same way normative theories, i) Authoritarian, ii) Libertarian, iii) Communist, iv) Social Responsibility (Seibert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956) v) development media theory and vi) media democratic participant theory (McQuail, 1983), also give the ideal ways to operate media in certain political system and sets code of ethics and guidelines for media organizations and practitioners.

As Kerlinger (1979) explains theory as, “a set of interrelated constructs (variables), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining natural phenomena”. So every theory of mass communication also constitutes the same characteristic and feature while specifying any given phenomena. These theories provide guidelines to researchers where to see, what to see and how to see. Any old theory can become a base for the future research. In case of uses and

gratification theory, some researchers claimed that it has become irrelevant in the modern study of communication but time has shown that with the advent of computer-mediated communication U&G has regained its significance (Ruggiero, 2000).

Theories help us in learning certain terms and important phrases along with their definitions. As in cultivation theory Gerbner & Gross (1976) has used the terms of “heavy viewers” and “light viewers”. For future researchers knowing these terms and their definition helps in formulating further study regarding effect of media content in shaping behaviors.

Theories are making sense of the world for us. In this age in spite of pervasive media penetration in our daily routines, still people are divided between haves and have nots, elites and ordinary people. Here in this situation, critical theories of mass communication derived from Frankfurt School (North, 2008) and neo-Marxism, challenge present social, economic and political systems which have led to this demarcation in societies. Learning of these critical theories can lead researchers towards the development of new systems more conducive to human development. Theorists can question the media elites and the way they surrender to influences of advertisers and their biased political and economic motives if they learn and develop a foundation of propaganda model by Chomsky and Herman (1988) and political economy theory of Murdock (1989). Theories like agenda setting which states media does not tell what to think but tell what to think about (McComb & Shaw 1972), can direct future researcher to suggest the usage of this media power for advocacy of right causes rather than propaganda of government policies and interests.

With the advancement of new technologies it is important to learn their new patterns so diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1983) can guide how new media technologies are becoming the part of our daily routines and what is the outcome of this technology boom.

Thus theories of mass communication not only decide the issues for research but they can transform the media into change agent of society by giving the guidelines for the future practice as well.

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