Maalim
Revue of Media and Communication Studies

Communication and Food Security Laboratory
Faculty of Information Sciences and Communication
University of Algiers 3

Volume 08, Issue01
June 2026
Pages 13/24
ISSN 2716-9111
EISSN: 2800-0846

The digital environment and the problem of the systematic use of theoretical approaches in media and communication research - Research from a diagnostic/inductive perspective-

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Received on 20/11/2025 Accepted on : 20/06/2025 Published on : 28/06/2026

Abstract:

The cognitive, scientific, and research approach in media and communication studies is characterized by the presence of theoretical frameworks that frame it on multiple levels. These frameworks contribute to understanding phenomena, revealing the nature of the complex relationships between them, and comprehending the morphology of their variables and their structural composition. With the emergence of a new digital environment, a recurring, long-standing issue has arisen concerning the extent to which these theoretical frameworks keep pace with the phenomena emerging in this environment, and their capacity to explain them.

Accordingly, our study seeks to formulate a proposal that discusses the issue of theoretical methodology from the perspective of its functional value within the research, cognitive, and academic context of media and communication studies, and to explore the problems associated with the interpretive concepts for employing theoretical frameworks in media and communication research within both classical and digital environments.

Keywords: Theory; Theoretical Approaches; Research; Media and Communication; Digital Environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Supporting academic studies with a perspective that approaches understanding phenomena represents an essential epistemological foundation in all research fields, especially in the context of media and communication sciences and the research they encompass in their various specializations. With the emergence of the new digital environment, the increasing immersion of individuals and users of all categories within it, and the emergence of behaviors and phenomena that have changed the general pattern of media and communication sciences, it was inevitable that many actual attempts would emerge to deconstruct and understand everything contained within the latter.

However, the problem that subsequently became clear indicated a significant shortcoming in a set of methodological procedures, and it became necessary to pose the question of what can be considered to keep pace with the rapid changes in the digital environment, given the potential for research in media and communication sciences to explain and study them. Within this current debate, the possibility of conducting extensive discussions on theoretical approaches and their relevance in media and communication research related to the digital environment has become a matter of considerable debate. This debate concerns the extent to which theories in the field of media and communication research can be used to explain, deconstruct, and analyze phenomena, study them in-depth, and arrive at near-accurate results, provided all obstacles are overcome.

Accordingly, this study attempts to deconstruct the aforementioned proposition and answer the following set of questions:

1. What is the value of theory in the field of media and communication research in both classical and digital contexts?

2. What are the problems of theoretical approaches to media and communication presented within the digital environment?

3. What are the challenges of theoretical approaches in the field of media and communication sciences within the digital environment?

2. Conceptualization:

2.1 Theory:

It is a supposition or a system of ideas which intended to explain something". Three words are of particular interest here. First, the definition is clear that a theory is an explanation; theories offer or provide accounts of how and why things are as they are. Second, they "intend" to explain. This implies that they may not which is a useful caveat. Third, "something" implies phenomena separate to and independent of the theory. As the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) definition goes on to state, "especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained". This suggests that a theory explains not just a, or the, particular instance of something but all and any instances. So, implicit in this part of the definition is a proposition that a theory, if it is valid and is to have

value, provides an explanation with general and perhaps universal application. This clearly associates the notion of theory with "scientism" and so with scientific principles and practices. It is also instructive to be aware of what is not a theory. According to Sutton and Stow (1995) theory is not references, data, lists of variables, diagrams, or predictions. Most of these may be used in theory building or the result of theory building but they do not constitute theory. Neither do predictions; a theory may allow or support prediction but the prediction is not the theory. (Stewart, Harte , & Sambrook, 2011)

2.2 The Theoretical Approach:

Cognitive perceptions have differed regarding a single, unified concept of the theoretical approach, given that it intersects with numerous concepts, such as theory, approach, and theoretical conception. However, a review of the reference literature agrees on the idea that it is a single meaning for multiple terms.

Therefore, it can be said that the theoretical approach is:

A set of hypotheses and/or concepts based on facts and observations that attempt to clarify a phenomenon. (Arabic, 2022)

The theoretical approach is also generally defined as a set of declarative, logical, abstract, and accepted propositions that attempt to explain the relationships between phenomena. (Djalbi ali, 1999, p. 24)

We can conclude procedurally that the theoretical approach is a concept established according to a cumulative, systematic, and scientific formula, capable of resolving ambiguity and questioning about a phenomenon formed in an incomprehensible or unknown form.

2.3 The Research:

Research as "the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data." To research is to search again, to take another, more careful look, to find out more"

Okafor (2000) considers research as "any organized enquiry that is aimed at providing information for solving identified problems, as seen by Kothari and Garg (2014) it is "a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic." (OBONG , 2024, p. 77)

The word "research" originated from the old French word "recerchier" meaning to search and search again. It literally implies repeating a search for something and implicitly assumes that the earlier search was not exhaustive and complete in the sense that there is still scope for improvement. Research in common parlance refers to a search for knowledge. It may be defined as a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic/area. In fact, research is an art of scientific investigation. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English lays down the meaning of research as "a careful investigation or inquiry especially through search for new facts in any branch of knowledge". Redman and Mory define research as "a systematized effort to gain new knowledge". Some people

consider research as a movement, a movement from known to unknown. It is actually a voyage of discovery. (Kabir, 2016)

2.4 Media:

The dictionary of media and communication defines it as means of transmitting information; and it is the various forms, devices, and systems that make up mass communications considered as a whole, including newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television channels, and Web sites. Before alphabetic writing, the media for communicating information were oral-auditory and pictographic. Writing facilitated the creation and storage of printed texts. Later print technology made such texts available to masses of people. Marshall McLuhan called the social world in which the use of printed texts became widespread the Gutenberg Galaxy, after the German printer Johannes Gutenberg, who is traditionally considered the inventor of movable type in the West. (Danesi , 2009, p. 192)

Accordingly, the media can be defined as the set of means and technologies available to transmit information and news to the various audiences of these means.

2.5 Communication:

It is the exchange of messages through some channel and in some medium. Communication theorists usually classify communication into modes, that is, different ways of exchanging messages: for example, gestural (hand-based communication); vocal (voice-based communication); visual (picture-based communication); signaling (bodily based communication); and so on. When pluralized (communications), the term refers to media systems or technologies of communication. (Danesi , 2009, p. 69)

2.6 Digital Environment:

The concept of the digital environment represents a profound perception of the symbolic spaces and domains that information and communication technology has created for user interaction and the generation of unlimited texts and images. Accordingly, at the academic level, researchers view the latter as:

An environment that relies primarily on the information network and computers, encompassing a large number of electronic resources and technical facilities associated with the production and use of information in a manner that allows for search and retrieval. (Belhouchet, & Rahaili, 2015, pp. 508-509) It can also be said that the digital environment is a workspace based on modern technological means used in all fields via electronic systems.

We define it from a procedural perspective: as a virtual, symbolic space directly related to information and communication technology, forming an unlimited field for individual and group interaction and shaping a social environment parallel to the classical real world.

3. The value of theory in the field of media and communication research in classical and digital contexts:

Theory is, rather, the result of serious studies, research, and discussions that have reached a certain stage of development, placed within a cognitive and scientific framework to explain phenomena, whether before or after the emergence of the digital environment.

Theories are also based on a body of theorizing and assumptions that have been gradually confirmed through field applications. Hence, the most important characteristic of communication and media theory is its ongoing ability to generate new concepts within the framework of media and communication research. From this standpoint, researchers have defined media theories as the summation of the findings of researchers studying human communication with the masses, with the aim of explaining media and communication phenomena, attempting to control them, and predicting their applications and impact on society. It is a description of media and communication systems in all countries of the world. The theory also represents a definitive definition of the relationship between facts and variables, helping the researcher in the field of media and communication to provide a theoretical framework for the phenomenon, which enables them to anticipate its direction of movement. It represents an intellectual framework for a number of generalizations with a common relationship. This framework provides an explanation and prediction of scientific phenomena. (Al-Mashakbah, 2011, pp. 79-80)

Baran (2004) clearly assumes that theories and their applications to communication research form the basis for understanding the causal relationship between communication research variables, particularly how they influence each other. Given the importance of theory, communication researchers risk assuming that it is irrelevant to their research efforts. The justification is simple: communication research relies on theories to derive its theoretical foundations (or frameworks) upon which research can be based. Beyond establishing these foundations, theories, when applied functionally or critically to communication research, aim to clarify and explain observed communication patterns. In simpler terms, theories, when adopted or applied to communication research, seek to validate their findings and provide a basis for critical discourse analysis about the possibility of communication research findings being based on a principle, tenet, essence, or position of the theories they formulate as a theoretical underpinning or foundation. This means that theories are not adopted as mere abstract statements or conventionally used to fill gaps in communication research; rather, they have functional and epistemic value in the process and outcomes of communication research. Moreover, communication research, based on its findings, always seeks, albeit latently in most cases, to clarify, inform, or use references to the claims, principles, ideals, essence, or core of the theories formulated to support their theoretical foundations. In this context, the application of theories to communication research seeks to demonstrate the relevance, relationship, and interconnectedness between communication research variables and the theories adopted. (OBONG , 2024, p. 76)

Thus, while the theory represents a higher level of final determination of relationships between variables based on scientific interpretation, it also represents an intellectual vessel for other hypotheses derived from these theories.

It is also considered an interpretive framework for relationships within and outside the digital environment that can be used in other scientific fields. Theories of cognitive psychology are widely used in the fields of mass communication and media, and many facts can be derived that serve other scientific fields, such as employing them in constructing generalizations regarding the effects of media in the digital environment. They can also be

employed in constructing generalizations regarding media financing and its economic relations, in addition to the possibility of employing them in international relations.

The field of communication theory and research has undergone a major transformation in the digital age, driven by rapid technological advancements and the proliferation of digital platforms. One of the most prominent trends is the rise of digital studies and social media studies, which examine how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram influence communication patterns, identities, and social movements. This shift highlights the growing importance of networked public spheres and participatory cultures, where users not only consume but also produce and disseminate content. Big data and analytics have become an integral part of contemporary communication research. These technologies enable researchers to analyze massive data sets to uncover insights into human behavior, media consumption, and information dissemination. This trend has led to the emergence of computational communication, which uses algorithms and machine learning to process and interpret data. Researchers are now also examining how these multimodal texts influence audience engagement, understanding, and emotional responses. (Almakaty, 2024, p. 10126)

The concept of "media influence" also reflects current trends, emphasizing the pervasive influence of media and communication technologies on all aspects of society. This theoretical framework explores how media shape and are shaped by cultural, political, and economic processes. Furthermore, there has been growing interest in the ethical implications of digital communications, including issues related to privacy, surveillance, and data security. The challenges of maintaining ethical standards in an era of mass data collection and algorithmic decision-making have sparked widespread academic debate. Finally, the field has seen an increasing focus on interdisciplinary approaches that integrate perspectives from sociology, psychology, political science, and information technology to address the multifaceted nature of digital communications. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for developing comprehensive theories and methodologies that can keep pace with the rapid evolution of communication technologies. These current trends and developments point to a dynamic and rapidly evolving field, driven by the need to understand and navigate the complexities of the contemporary communications landscape. (Almakaty, 2024, pp. 10126-10127)

It can be said that the importance of theory lies in its guidance to the researcher in the field of media and communication to the correct questions that he poses and lies behind his ability to test the phenomenon under study. Without theory, relationships remain mere visions or collected facts, but it unifies facts into a single framework that explains and helps predict. The high level of theory does not mean its stability and immutability, but rather that it is subject to change with the change in knowledge and sciences within which the theory was formulated, because theory is part of a whole that represents the framework of organized knowledge or the framework of sciences in its various specializations. Theories also provide, in their interpretation of facts and relationships, many concepts and renewable variables, including those related to the digital environment, whose relationships are then tested in new

hypotheses, and so on. This expresses a process of change and renewal in scientific knowledge. (Abd al-Hamid, 2004, p. 8)

3. Problems of the theoretical approaches proposed within the framework of the digital environment: Investigating the nature of shortcomings:

As a result of the transformations in the media and communication environment, the development of the digital domain, and the entry of societies with diverse identities into a unified, globalized society, it is clear that traditional theories are unable to accommodate media phenomena in a completely different digital environment. Furthermore, most of these theories were born from a different media, social, and cultural context with divergent, and sometimes completely opposite, characteristics.

This makes the issue of borrowing them in the digital environment fraught with numerous caveats, given the ongoing disagreement among researchers about the validity of employing traditional theoretical approaches and models in studies focused on the digital environment. Consequently, the frame of reference and theoretical approaches in media and communication research within the digital environment and social media face several major challenges, including:

- The changing characteristics and nature of the media phenomenon being studied, the varying characteristics of the reality that produces it, and the interplay of diverse factors in its formation, which are difficult to enumerate or generalize. (Ali Al-Qa'ari, 2020, p. 32)

- The inability of comprehensive and holistic theories to grasp the phenomena of social media in the digital media environment.

- The lack of effort in developing theoretical approaches that are compatible with the nature of new media phenomena, on the one hand. On the other hand, some researchers have tended to borrow models and theories from other fields and sciences as a matter of research precedence, without sufficient knowledge of their potential application in extrapolating social media phenomena. Others have relied on epistemological concepts not derived from the study of phenomena associated with new media, without in-depth consideration of deriving their own concepts.

- The difficulty of applying some traditional theories to new media within the framework of the digital environment, the changing means of communication and their relationship to other variables and factors, and the emergence of new media that are not subject to the same familiar regulatory controls, such as blogs and citizen journalism.

- The absence of explanatory visions for media and communication phenomena in the digital environment, such as analyzing small group communication, analyzing the psychological dimensions associated with immediate interaction with individuals and texts, the transmission of rumors, and so on. (Bakhit, 2016, p. 169)

The available theories are not always appropriate to the research reality and are not aligned with the goals the researcher seeks to achieve. Given the rapid pace of research and developments, some specializations within communication and media sciences may be slow

to formulate theories that can be relied upon in conducting research and studies. (Bouziane, 2023, p. 172)

A quick look at the nature of the academic programs taught in the field of media over the past thirty years clearly demonstrates the reasons for the lack of development of media theories, similar to those in other sciences. Academic departments specializing in journalism and public speaking used to teach various communication skills to undergraduate students, even extending beyond that to teaching non-specialists in the field of media and communication. There is no doubt that focusing on such a range of academic fields related to communication has helped to create a negative stereotype among other academic departments about communication departments, which suggests that specialists in this art are teachers of communication skills, not researchers. (Al-Bishr, 2003, p. 92)

The problem of separating methodological tools and strategies in media and communication studies from the theoretical approach on which they are based appears through their use without theoretical insight. This may obscure the vision of scientific facts and lead their users to a tendency to justify media practices without interpreting them and extracting their significance. Therefore, we note that serious references in methodology link the teaching of curricula to theories. A methodological study is not merely a set of technical recommendations, but rather is based on clarifying the explicit or ambiguous relationship between a theory or theories and the research problems, hypotheses, questions, and objectives. Data collection is no longer the primary goal of contemporary media research, especially in the digital environment. (Al-Ayadhi, 2020, p. 107)

This greatly limits the development of theories and their ability to keep pace with emerging phenomena, especially those linked to phenomenological change within the digital environment. It is also related to the researcher's inability to construct a correct approach to his study and his inability to clearly define the methodological steps of the study, which clearly affects determining the nature of the theory employed or its suitability for the phenomenon studied, especially with regard to the digital environment.

This includes the poor control of the conceptual apparatus of the research, as it is one of the starting points for facilitating the determination of the theoretical approach employed. Rather, we find some research devoid of defining the terms and concepts that represent a fundamental basis for examining the subject and crystallizing the research problem, which is based on a lexical construction founded on the categories and concepts that express the essence and content of the phenomenon studied and help in understanding and explaining its various dimensions.

These obstacles also include the problem of constructing research tools that enable the researcher to explore, observe and follow the media phenomenon, collect data about it, measure its elements and analyze the units of the research community, in addition to the problems of this analysis itself, the results of which are the result of a misunderstanding of the essence of the research process from the beginning, and also reliance on secondary references that are outdated, or not credible, from the research or scientific side, such as collective blogs and collaborative platforms, which raises the issue of academic integrity and

research ethics, which require objectivity, avoiding preconceived notions and preconceived ideas, and ensuring accuracy in conveying and discussing the ideas of other researchers. Here, the problem of academic arbitration for media and communication research and studies cannot be overlooked. This issue, in part, reflects the crisis in ethical codes for scientific research, as well as the stagnation currently affecting the Arab academic and research landscape. (Al Jazeera Centre for MediaStudies, 2021)

The most important theoretical problems facing Arab researchers in the field of media and communication in general, and the digital environment in particular, are a misunderstanding of the exact nature of theory, its place, and its role in scientific research.

The results of numerous studies, such as the studies by Sawsan Lounansah and Laila Ben Latrache, have confirmed that many researchers do not rely on any theory in their research. Those who did rely on a theory were satisfied with theories specific to the traditional media environment and did not attempt to use new or developed theories more suited to the specificities of new media. Even the classical theories adopted were not properly employed, which could be reflected in the research results. Therefore, the claim that the theory is flawed because it is Western and incompatible with Arab societies is highly misleading. (Lounansah & Ben Latrache, 2019, p. 224)

This is what Layadi argued in his study, where he stated that many students and teachers of the social and human sciences in the Arab region have unfortunately adopted the idea of subordination to Western theories in the field of social science research in the Arab region without examining or analyzing them. They have declared their inadequacy in understanding social and media phenomena at the Arab level. (Al-Ayadhi, Research in the Arab Region and the Absence of a Theoretical Horizon, 2016, p. 10)

Reality proves once again, on a more detailed level, that Western media and communication theories, like any intellectual product, are a natural product of the cognitive and social environment that produced them. Anyone who contemplates the theories will find that they are a product of the Western social cognitive foundation, which has witnessed many developments until it achieved the transition - over eight centuries - from the dominance of religious thought to the dominance of positivist thought, passing through many intellectual eras, including the era of the humanist movement, then the Renaissance, then the Enlightenment, and the eras of modernity and post-modernity that followed. All of this carried with it diverse and sometimes conflicting social ideologies; however, they all revolve in the end - within the orbit of the positivist worldview or cosmology, which differs in its individual and social starting points, goals, and means from the religious worldview (cosmology) as a whole.

Thus, the epistemological and social foundation from which Western media and communication theories are based is vastly different from the epistemological and social foundation that together shapes the thought and reality of the Arab societies to which we belong. (El-Samasiri, 2024, pp. 56-57)

Certainly, some of these theories, and some of the propositions of others, may be based on objective scientific foundations independent of the Western intellectual and social foundation. However, there is a problem we must be aware of, namely that each of these theories is ultimately an integrated intellectual structure, and it is not easy to utilize some of its propositions and reject others.

Each of its propositions only works efficiently within the framework to which it belongs in its entirety. This framework is ultimately a structure inevitably captive to larger intellectual structures until it ultimately revolves within the orbit of the cosmological structure, from whose comprehensive perspectives no theory dealing with human affairs can escape, no matter how far the gap between it and these comprehensive propositions.

Therefore, when we apply the propositions of these theories to the study of communication and media phenomena in Arab society, which possesses a cognitive foundation that belongs to a cosmological structure that is largely different from that of the West, we encounter two possibilities: (El-Samasiri, 2024, p. 57)

- The failure of research efforts based on these theories to understand, explain, and guide the communication phenomena they study, and consequently, their failure to guide the movement of communication media in our societies, due to the difference between the context that produced them and the context in which they are implanted. This means that these efforts do not yield the positive results desired by the time, effort, and money invested in them.

- The forced application and implantation of these theories may yield bitter fruits in a cognitive and social environment that is different from their own, due to the integrated knowledge system they bring with them, specific to a civilization that embraces a knowledge system that is largely different from its own. Thus, in both cases, there is an inevitable flaw that will be built on the dominance of these theories over Arab communication studies and their consequent dominance over the media and communication reality that they view in Arab societies...a flaw that requires Arab media and communication theorists to move quickly to develop effective solutions for it.

3. The Challenges of Theoretical Approaches in the Digital Environment: Towards Establishing Guiding Recommendations:

After discussing the nature of the problem and understanding the mechanisms of theoretical approaches in terms of their employment and adoption in media and communication research, we must come up with a set of recommendations to attempt to overcome all associated obstacles, such as:

- Media specialists must seek a way to construct a theory they themselves adopt, rather than relying on theories originating in other scientific disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and political science. (Al-Bishr, 2003, p. 109)

- Adapting theoretical approaches, in particular, to the digital environment and the pattern of ethnographic interactions of the respondents, so that these can effectively explain phenomena.

- Attempting to make theories flexible, capable of modification and updating, to help keep pace with changes in the digital environment.

- Establishing a periodic conference and general assembly aimed at providing a general and detailed overview of the variables in the digital environment and how media and communication can adapt to them, in terms of the nature of the explanatory theories and even the methodological tools specific to this field in general.

4. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is by no means possible to assert that all theoretical approaches in media and communication sciences research are incapable of explaining the phenomena of the digital environment in their entirety. Similarly, it is impossible to assume that classical theories are capable of understanding all the dimensions and relationships between actors in emerging phenomena associated with the digital domain.

Accordingly, a call has become necessary to conduct serious reviews that will help resolve all these problems and clarify the ambiguity, either by reformulating the hypotheses and concepts of the theories or/and by developing new approaches capable of assisting scientific research within the field of media and communication sciences.

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