

Towards the Modernisation of Theoretical Frameworks in Communication Research in the Arab World

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Abstract:

Arguing that most traditional theoretical frameworks in communication research in the Arab World fail to understand the region's communication complexities comprehensively, this paper proposes some modern trends in communication research. This paper presents the use of traditional theoretical frameworks overused in Arab academia, emphasising the necessity for modernisation and contextualisation of these frameworks.

It highlights the importance of applying trends in theoretical frameworks that include "Contextualism", "Indigenous theory" and "post-colonial theories" and their added value to research in the region. This paper presents a secondary data analysis of Arab research papers, Master's Theses, and PhD dissertations published in the Field of Journalism. The study concluded that most studies in the Arab world have neglected the use of the CIPC and have relied extensively on traditional frameworks, resulting in a lack of Arab identity in research.

Keywords: CIPC, agenda setting, framing, uses and gratification, secondary data analysis, post-colonial theories, Contextualism and Indigenous theory.

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نحو تطوير أطر نظرية حديثة في الدراسات الإعلامية في العالم العربي أ.م.د. سارة سعيد المغربي*

ملخص الدراسة:

تفشل الأطر النظرية التقليدية في مجال بحوث الاتصال في العالم العربي في تقديم فهما شاملا لتعقيدات الواقع الاعلامي في المنطقة ولذلك فان هذه الورقة البحثية تقترح توظيف ثلاثة اطر نظرية حديثة وهي CIPC وتسعي هذه الدراسة الي لقاء الضوء علي اوجه القصور التي تواجهها الدراسات التي تتعامل مع الأطر النظرية التقليدية التي تم استخدامها بكثرة مفرطة. وتؤكد هذه الدراسة على أهمية التركيز علي تبني اطر نظرية اكثر ارتباطا بالواقع العربي والسياق المجتمعي والفكر والثقافي. وتقدم هذه الدراسة تصورا متعلق بثلاثة أطر نظرية وهي اولا نظرية السياقية، نظرية المحلية أو السكان الاصليين ونظرية ما بعد الاستعمار . وتعد هذه الورقة تحليل من المستوي الثاني لعدد من الاوراق البحثية العربية ورسائل الماجستير والدكتوراه في مجال الصحافة. وخلصت الدراسة الي أن أغلب الدراسات العربية غابت عنها توظيف الاطر.

الكلمات الدالة:

السياق ، تحليل المستوي الثاني، ما بعد الاستعمار

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Introduction:

Most Arab media and communication studies researchers heavily rely on traditional methods, frameworks and topics. By 'traditional,' the researcher means the imported Western media and communication research tradition, especially the Americanized and European ones. This paper will refer to the Western and European media and communication studies schools as the traditional framework.

Because the Arab world has an entirely different and unique culture, history, and language, it also has a distinct socio-economic-political landscape that reflects its media environment and, consequently, the media and communication studies field.

In this paper, the researcher argues that applying traditional frameworks to non-Western, non-European contexts, such as Arabic, Indian, African, or Asian, can never fully capture the nuances and complexities of the media. Using theories from their context can never result in comprehensive results. It will always leave a gap and inevitably cause a lack of understanding of the dynamics.

In the Arab world, theories like agenda-setting, framing, uses, and gratification have become the go-to theories used by most young researchers. They have been widely used and repeated by professors and pioneers. Researchers often take these theories for granted, assuming they will apply to the Arabic context as they do in the Western context. There is no doubt, however, that these widely used theories overlook the socio-political, cultural, and historical aspects of the Arab world, resulting in incomplete research.

Therefore, local researchers should dedicate intensive research to creating new frameworks, methods, and topics tailored to the local community's needs. These new frameworks should support the local academia in developing research that closely engages with the community, utilises methods and frameworks that suit the dynamics of society, and yields results that can support the development of local communities and be applied to the Arab world.

From my perspective, the nontraditional, new, and modern research frameworks should highlight three main theories taught at

communication schools and faculties: young MA students, PhD students, and professors. In this paper, the researcher suggests applying what the researcher calls the “three modernised frameworks”: Contextualism, indigenous theory, and post-colonial theory.

Research Problem:

In the age of Americanization and Westernisation in all aspects of life, it has become more challenging to remain authentic and keep the local identity in the non-American and non-Western communities. This fact is reflected in media and communication studies and research in the so-called Global South or the majority world in general. Therefore, there is a growing necessity to find and create local methods, theories and research ideas that target the local communities and respond to their need. It has become more necessary that researchers from the Majority World find, create and suggest theories and models that could help identify the problems and challenges in their local communities. Through these theoretical frameworks, academia in the Majority World will flourish and support the communities even better than relying on imported theories in different cultural contexts.

Research Objectives:

This paper aims to list the limitations of traditional media theories in communication in the Arab world and to suggest a framework that could solve these limitations. The main objective is to support the academic research in communication and journalism in the Arab world through a modernised, non-Western theoretical framework comprising three neglected theories.

Research Questions:

1. RQ1. What are the limitations of traditional media theories in communication research in the Arab world?
2. RQ2. How can the three modernised frameworks, CIPC, like Contextualism, Indigenous theory, and post-colonial theories, support academic research in communication and journalism in the Arab world?

Methodology:

Data Collection:

This paper is a secondary data analysis of Arab research papers, Master's theses, and PhDs published in the Field of Journalism. A 5-step model has been applied in this paper to grant a comprehensive presentation of theoretical frameworks in the Arab world. Step 1: Academic Search: an academic search on studies, papers, theses and dissertations published in Arabic and English has been conducted on databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate using keywords which are "Arab communication research," "media theories," "Contextualism," "Indigenous theory," and "post-colonial theories." Step 2: Filtration and Selection: Relevant studies have been selected, and 20 studies were reached. Step 3: Data Extraction: A template has been created to collect relevant information, including the name and type of theoretical framework (traditional or new). Step 4: Data Analysis and Step 5: Findings and Conclusion

Theoretical Framework: CIPC: The Three Modernised Frameworks

In this paper, the researcher suggests using “three modernised frameworks” (Fig.1) in contrast to the “traditional frameworks”. What these three frameworks have in common is that they incorporate the context and local aspects that will, in the end, help to understand communication in the Arab world with more depth. In this section, the researcher will outline how these three frameworks can be applied in Arabic journalism research and the benefits and challenges researchers may encounter when utilising these frameworks.

These three modernised frameworks are Contextualism C, Indigenous Theory I, and Post-colonial Theory PC, abbreviated CIPC. The CIPC could serve as a new guidebook for media scholars and academics in the Arab world, providing a comprehensive overview of media research.

CIPC will benefit Arab researchers by providing more nuances and a deeper understanding of communication in the Arab world. It will help in discussing sensitive topics in the Arab world, like suicide, taboos and sexual content, avoiding the Western vision. When

research applies CIPC to communication research, it becomes more relevant to society and less abstract, leading to a better tailoring of effective communication strategies.

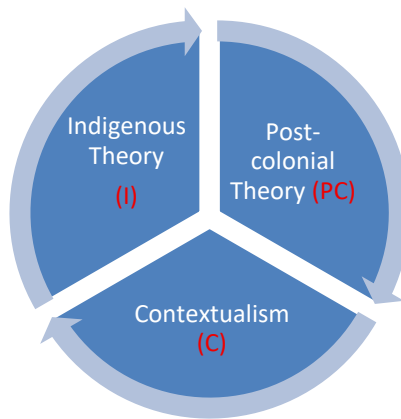


Fig.1. The 3 Modernised Theoretical Frameworks suggested by the author

#1 Modernised Framework: Contextualism:

Stephen Pepper is one of the best-known researchers in the world for Contextualism, especially in philosophy and psychology. Together with Andreas Hepp, Pepper applied this framework to media and communication. The primary focus of the first modernised framework, Contextualism, is the context, whether cultural, historical or social. The idea behind Contextualism is that “any meaning is shaped by the context in which it occurred”. The key principle is the "act-in-context", which suggests that its specific context should be analysed to understand any action and phenomenon.

This framework examines the context of communication and can be applied in the Arab world by considering, firstly, Arab cultural norms, values, traditions, and religion; secondly, Arab history and the main historical events that have shaped the region, such as imperialism and colonialism; or thirdly, the social structures, dynamics, and power. It could be particularly constructive for researchers working with international and cross-cultural communication and qualitative studies.

#2 Modernised Framework: Indigenous Theory:

Indigenous theory has been developed over the years by Indigenous scholars who sought to challenge Western stereotypes and representations and promote local voices. During the 1980s and 1990s, Linda Smith and Shawn Wilson began the application of indigenous research methodologies. It was not well known until Bagele Chilisa contributed and developed the indigenous research methodologies in the 2000s.

This theory aims to develop theoretical frameworks rooted in local cultures and indigenous societies, incorporating their voices and experiences into research. According to this theory, Western research approaches are challenged, and priority is given to local communities, resulting in better engagement of the local society in research. In communication research, this theory can be applied to studies on representing a specific group or community, or the citizens of a particular country, and their portrayal in the media. It could also be applied to all research that deals with alternative media forms that give voice to minorities and local communities.

#3 Modernised Framework: Post-colonial Theory:

By analysing the impact of colonialism on societies, post-colonial theory started in the mid-20th century. The main ideas of this theory include how the media has played a role in shaping power and dominance during the colonisation of regions and people, whether through the dissemination of propaganda, the creation of stereotypes, or the control of narrative and storytelling related to a group of people or a community. Scholars like Edward Said and others have developed a theory that continues to be discussed today, focusing on social injustice, dominance, and decolonisation.

In general, post-colonial theories highlight the impact of colonialism and imperialism on communication dynamics and could be very helpful in academic research in the Arab world. They could also be invaluable in studies on globalisation, the Global South and the Global North, the image and stereotypical image of certain groups and

communities, inclusivity, and giving voice to minorities in any society.

Findings:

RQ1. What are the limitations of traditional media theories in communication research in the Arab world?

The secondary data analysis has shown the following four trends related to the limitations of traditional media theories applied in communication studies in the Arab World, which are: Heavy reliance on conventional frameworks, lack of depth and understanding of the context, Superficial Engagement of researchers in developing new frameworks and the lack of crucial cultural aspects in many studies.

The excessive use of traditional frameworks in Arab academia focuses on Uses and Gratification, Framing, and similar frameworks. The results show that most of these studies lack a deeper understanding and connection to the context and Arab identity. Topics such as cultural sensitivity, power dynamics, and indigenous voices are often neglected. Mostly, context and culture are briefly summarised in the last couple of pages of the MA thesis or PhD, with no application of a framework that supports the explanation. Primarily, researchers rely on their personal opinions and experiences as Arabic citizens, mostly missing the cultural, historical, and socio-political aspects.

In this inverted pyramid (Fig.2), the researcher would like to explain the intensity and frequency of using the traditional theoretical framework in the study sample.

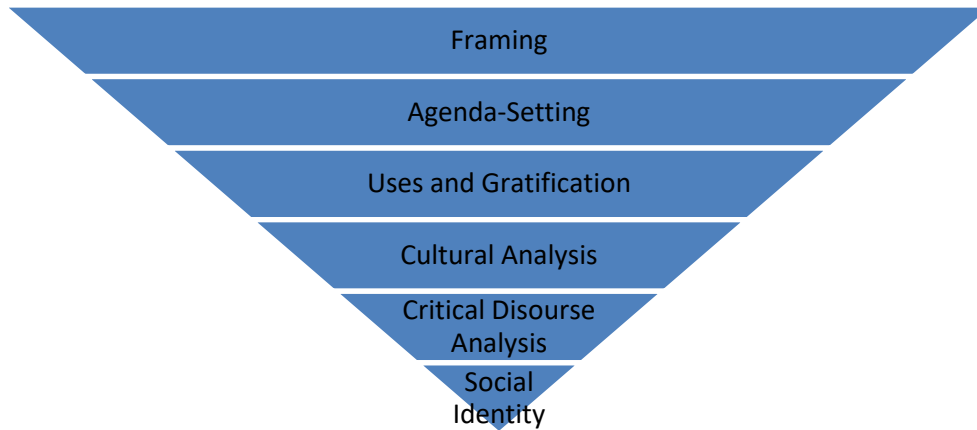


Fig.2. The intensity and frequency of traditional theoretical frameworks in the sample
RQ2. How can the three modernised frameworks, CIPC, like Contextualism, Indigenous theory, and post-colonial theories, support academic research in communication and journalism in the Arab world?

The analysis showed that applying the three modernised frameworks, CIPC, could significantly enhance the development of communication research and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the media environment and communication dynamics within society. CIPC could add a deeper layer to communication studies in a unique region, the Arab world. Applying the CIPC will help science better impact society, as it will be more connected to the culture and values of the specific society and the Arab context in general.

Related to Contextualism in Media studies, it could be used to analyse how messages are interpreted differently across various cultural and social contexts, informing studies on intercultural communication and media representation.

Using Contextualism in communication research could be very useful in the various understandings of social messages among different cultures outside and inside the Arab World. It also offers a better understanding of why different groups, such as marginalised and minorities, are presented a certain way by a certain media outlet. In the field of International and intercultural communication, the

Contextualism theory could look at the effect of global media on news coverage and cross-cultural messages. Contextualism could be applied to digital media content, including social media platforms, and all forms of traditional media.

The Indigenous Theory could examine the legacy of colonialism and imperialism on communication, highlighting issues of power, representation, and cultural identity. It helps to study how media representation perpetuates colonial narratives, and how marginalised voices can be amplified through alternative forms of communication. This theory could be very useful in investigating how colonialism has presented stereotypes about certain groups of society and how the majority-dominated media have depicted minorities. Another field of interest could be looking at alternative communication or media platforms representing marginalised groups. It could also look at how minorities and indigenous groups are presenting

4. **Indigenous Media Practices and Cultural Identity:** Examine how Indigenous media practices and communication strategies contribute to preserving or negotiating cultural identity in the face of globalisation or cultural homogenization.

Applying the Post-colonial Theory in communication research could emphasise the importance of Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and communication practices, challenging dominant Western epistemologies. It informs studies on decolonisation, Indigenous media, and community-based communication initiatives, highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and representation.

Post-colonial Theory in Communication Research:

1. **Decolonising Communication Practices:** Investigate how decolonisation efforts in communication practices can challenge dominant Western epistemologies and promote Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and communication practices in specific contexts.
2. **Indigenous Perspectives in Media Representation:** Analyse how Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are represented (or misrepresented) in mainstream media, and how this impacts cultural sensitivity and representation.

3. **Community-Based Communication Initiatives:** Study community-based communication initiatives that promote cultural sensitivity, Indigenous knowledge, and local perspectives in media production and dissemination in post-colonial or marginalised contexts.
4. **Challenging Dominant Western Epistemologies:** Examine how post-colonial theory can inform strategies for challenging dominant Western epistemologies in communication research and practice, promoting more inclusive and diverse perspectives.

Conclusion:

This paper argues that traditional theoretical frameworks in communication research within the Arab world are limited and cannot comprehensively understand media and communication in Arab societies. If researchers in the Arab world implement the three suggested modernised frameworks in communication research, which are Contextualism, Indigenous theory, and post-colonial theories, media and communication research is more aligned with the Arabic identity.

Recommendations:

According to this paper, researchers and academics in the field of communication in the Arab world could apply this suggested framework to enhance their understanding of the media environment in the region in the following way:

1. Prioritisation of developing Indigenous theoretical frameworks grounded in local cultures and prioritisation
2. Adoption of approaches closely related to the Arab and local context, including cultural, historical, and social contexts.
3. Application of post-colonial theories to focus on the effect of colonialism and imperialism on media in the Arab world.

Future research suggestions:

It is recommended that future research in communication in different countries from the Arab World and non-Western communities could incorporate the CIPC into their research and examine it.

They could investigate whether more theories could be added to this model or whether other models could fit better than the ones suggested in this research. Several comparative research papers between the Arab countries could explore similarities and differences by applying the proposed theoretical framework. Researchers could conduct comparative studies could be conducted between Arab, Asian, and African countries.

They could also analyse the impact of CIPC on research findings and how it could be applied in communication studies beyond journalism in radio, TV, marketing, and social media studies.

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