Theoretical perspectives of Internet-induced changes in communication
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Abstract
Online communication raises a lot of critical questions about which communication theories are still applicable in the online context and which ones are untenable or at least challenged by the presence of the Internet. This discourse paper explored ways in which patterns of communication on the Internet digress from mainstream communication, discussed the theoretical implications of such changes and recommended further studies of the theories in the online context.

Introduction
It is no more innovative that the emergence of the Internet as a medium of communication has engineered a paradigm shift, which starts right from the definitions and nomenclatures of communication. A popular and traditional description of the communication process as transmission of ideas from a sender to a receiver, suggests a linear and one-way flow of information; as well as a passive audience that merely receives messages pushed down on it from senders, who oftentimes were media organizations. This thinking contrasts the contemporary notion of the communication process as more of sharing or exchanging of ideas. The novel Internet-controlled representation of communication as sharing of messages, exchanging of information among users who are all involved in the communication process as participants, signifies at least a two-way-flow or multiple-flow of *conversations.* Unlike the Shannon and Weaver transmission model of 1949, the information sharing or exchanging imagery of digital communication does not suggest any linear movement of information, as online conversations flow in different, unstructured and arbitrary directions. The definition forecloses the passivity of the audience since they are also participants in the process and makes no distinction between sender and receiver.

This trend in understanding and rethinking some communication definitions, processes, theories, effects, concepts, etc. has always been a part of the communication history. However, since online communications now make the changes more conspicuous, the urgency in reconsidering new perceptions of communication cannot be over-emphasized. Beyond such basic modifications on the definitions and terminologies, the Internet has in so many other ways altered how communication was previously perceived, experienced or learned. While we are now accustomed to most of these revolutions, perhaps preceding studies have provided little theoretical explanations of the changes. This paper, therefore, examined how the Internet is challenging some fundamental concepts of communication and how these changes either fortify or weaken existing communication theories and models.

Deviations relating to the elements and process of communication
The Internet as a medium of communication has introduced changes to the essential elements and processes of communication which contrast what scholars and books taught communication students in the past. We learned that a sender (source) encodes and relays a message to a receiver (destination), through a channel, amidst some noise. The receiver then decodes the message and returns feedback. A look at some of these elements of a sender, message, receiver, channel, noise and feedback in online communication reveals the aberrations alluded to in this paper.

First, with the Internet, the sender-receiver roles are no more distinct since users function in both capacities almost simultaneously. Besides, the sender could now range from a complex, well-structured, fully equipped and staffed organization (as in the past), to a single individual who has an Internet-enabled device. Apart from possibly not having a corporate spatial office, this individual source could also have no professional training in any field of communication. So, the concept of a sender in online communication is strikingly different from the norm. Today, the sender could just be anyone who has a smartphone or any connected device and the urge to share any form of information.

On message related changes, mainstream media journalists provide fair, accurate and objective reports of facts about issues of relevance to people, giving due attribution to both the source of the news and the reporter/media organization that processed the information. Because a sizeable number of those who control online contents are not professional journalists, these journalistic values of news accuracy and objectivity are also no more guaranteed with online messages. Traditionally the message was also first processed and passed through several gatekeepers. Message processing and treatment would take forms such as editing, proofreading, copy editing, adapting the presentation style to fit the particular medium of communication, etc. Owing to the nature of the Internet which allows for thunder speed production and distribution of contents, an immediacy that cannot be matched by older media, message treatment and processing are sometimes ignored, resulting in poor quality communication. Consequently, online messages can be shared without any of the above-mentioned forms of processing. Apart from the speed of communication, this happens also because many of the senders lack the expertise or competency to process the messages.

Cutting off these levels of message processing means that the media industry's traditional gatekeeping function of dominantly deciding what filters in as news and what is edited out is undermined. Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa (2010) also acknowledged that the nature of the web plays down on the relevance of gatekeeping. Kurt Lewin's gatekeeping theory of 1947 postulated that the media actively select what contents filter through the many gates of the media house to eventually become news. Yet, on the Internet, anybody can authorize the passage of content. Based on this premise of a democratic and decentralized information flow, and that online contents are sometimes published without the usual editorial processing and filtering, it can safely be asserted that the gatekeeping theory is perhaps one of the communication theories most weakened by the Internet. Is the media's gatekeeping function feasible with online communication channels permitting an infinite number of contents from a crowd of sources? 'Many scholars question whether gatekeeping can be a tenable theory in the decentralized, new media environment where media abundance negates the role of a central news gatekeeper' (Meraz 2009, p. 684). As suggested by Meraz, the

multitude of online information outlets also implies in essence, the collapse of a central media gate. Similarly, Jones and Salter (2012) articulated that:

> The problem was that in the world of conventional news there exists a core consensus on who has the right to speak. But within the new digital environment, this privileged stance came under attack. The rise of bloggers and user-generated content rendered it difficult to define who counts as a reporter entitled to invoke this right (p. 82).

Relating also to the dismissal of the monopolistic media gatekeeper is the seeming disappearance of the media agenda-setter. Contrary to the expectations of the agenda-setting theory, many public discussions start not from the media but from online posts of ordinary citizens on social media. Thus, like the gatekeeping theory, the agenda-setting theory also calls for a review of how this media function is now performed in the new media environment. Critical questions that are evoked in this context include: who sets the public agenda for discussions in the digital media setting and who determines the agenda for the media? In the light of these Internet-directed changes on communication sources and flow patterns; message treatments and presentations that challenge core media roles, contemporary communication scholars have the critical task to subject many communication theories and models to test in online communication contexts.

For example, the Shannon and Weaver Transmission Model illustrates a linear communication flow, while the Interaction and Transaction Models portray two strides of the sent message and returned feedback. However, the flow of the message on the Internet is omnidirectional or web-patterned, as messages are fired in no particular order, coming from different directions; and feedbacks also bounce from different directions. In other words, there is no rigid and defined pattern of information flow on the Internet, rather a flexible pattern as online conversations are extremely unstructured.

Just like the sender, the message, and the pattern of communication flow presented above, the channel in the communication process is also affected by the Internet's revolutionary presence. Before the Internet age, there were clear cut lines separating print from electronic media. But the Internet's unique multimedia nature has blurred the lines demarcating print from broadcast messages in online contexts. In one breadth the Internet serves either as a television or film medium with a screen displaying visuals, animations, sounds, motions and live clips. In another instance, it functions as a magazine or newspaper delivering static pictures and detailed texts. The multi-media nature of online communications also makes online interactions richer with a blend of texts, graphics, visuals, animations, sounds, etc. By combining most of the strengths of print and electronic media, leaving out most of their weaknesses such as transiency, cost, lack of flexibility, etc. the Internet is indeed a unique medium of communication (Ohiagu, 2010). For instance, online versions of newspapers and magazines like electronic media also have the potential for immediacy since contents are updated instantly as events unfold. On the other hand, webcasts like print media messages are not transient because contents can be watched or listened to long after they are released online. Podcasts transcend not merely being transient by allowing users to download audio and video files that can be accessed when they are offline. Wood and Smith (2001, p. 35), summed it up that 'the Internet represents a new form of the mass medium'.

The other elements of communication: noise, feedback and receiver also have new meanings in digital media settings. On the Internet, there is a high-pitched noise (distractions and other factors that could affect the meaning of the message). The massive

load of information in itself constitutes a huge noise as contents clamour for users' attention. The volume of contents, a plethora of opinions, and the web of interwoven fields of experiences arising from online interactions can all meddle with the message interpretation. Also, the Internet's loud noise arises from the fact that much of the online contents are trash often lying side by side with rich and credible contents. The receiver has to sort the reliable information from the fake, the intelligent data from a heap of garbage.

About feedback, like the production and distribution of online contents, expressions as immediacy, instantaneous, prompt, rapid, etc. do not seem to adequately convey the speed and directness of online feedback. It happens in a flash of a moment. 'The immediacy and visibility of social media like Twitter allow for instant feedback and responses… in a way never seen before'. (Edwards et al. 2013, p. 260).

The Internet likewise makes fundamental alterations on the receiver, another key element in the communication process. Receiver related changes create a more informed and empowered audience. First, because the audience members are very active in the online conversations they are preferably referred to as users rather than audiences that connote inactivity. On the Internet, users actively participate and control not just what information to access but also when, where and how to do so. They also decide the platform on which to access the information (such as Twitter, Facebook, Google, etc.); the pace and order to access it. They are totally in charge of what messages to pay attention to and the manner to do so. Traditional media have limited audience control such as phoning in during a talk show or sending letters to the editor. The Internet users' control transcends functioning interchangeably as sender and receiver or contributing actively to the communication process. It also involves the power to choose what to read, listen to or watch and the authority to define how it should be done (Ohiagu 2014).

The selectivity theories quickly come to mind. The basic assumptions of selective exposure/attention, retention and perception are that the media audience members choose to expose themselves to some media contents while 'tuning off' others; they selectively pay attention and retain some media contents which tally with their beliefs, whereas other contents they don't agree with are deliberately ignored or erased. Given the fact that online users have a plethora of channel options that are only one or two clicks away, the selective process is further enhanced. Users discern carefully which websites to expose themselves to and which ones to avoid, in fact with greater freedom of choice than the traditional media audience. Conversations too are tailored to align with other users who share the same views. Of course with the extreme load of information available online, the choice of what to pay attention to or retain becomes even more difficult, but the inclination to engage in selective exposure, retention and perception is more likely. However, one cannot but agree with Stroud (2007) that the ample opportunity the Internet provides for people to engage in the selection of information matching their beliefs, also means increased avenues to seek diverse opinions, depending on the topic in question.

Online user participation can take different forms. Users can initiate the communication process or offer feedbacks by commenting, liking, sharing, rating, reacting to contents, etc. They can also mash up content (add something to the content), or generate part or all of the content. Other forms of audience involvement include citizen journalism where the users own the sites and control the flow of information. Crowdsourcing or open-source programming which makes users collectively contribute information on an issue such as in

wikis is still another form of user involvement. For example, on Wikipedia, countless anonymous writers submit, expand or alter the contents.

One implication of online users' control is the democratization of the media or freedom of expression for all who are connected. Everyone can invoke this right to expression in the real market square of ideas and opinions. This poses a threat to the media hegemony, that is, the extant authority/control of the mainstream media. Democratization ofdigital media platformsquestions the idea of conventional media having exclusive and privileged right as the credible purveyor of information. Online content providers may not be the ultimate authority of information purveyors but they certainly make it hard to decide who has the power. To an extent, this development defies the authoritarian media theory which places media control in the hands of media owners. The Internet means that media ownership is not only diluted but most people who own minimal gadgets and Internet connections are in a sense media owners, and therefore partake in the media control.

Underscoring the Internet's ownership structure that deviates from the pattern of ownership of the mainstream media, Rodman (2012) added that 'the first difference is in terms of ownership. No one really "owns" the Internet' (p.278). Its contents are either controlled by citizen journalists, click and mortars (traditional media companies that also publish online), or dot-coms, (new media companies that professionally produce only online contents). In contrast, only a few mega-companies own the mainstream media (Ohiagu, 2014). And if no one truly owns it, no one also controls it especially as it has no off or on buttons like other electronic media. Then the theory of a government-owned/controlled media and the effect of its ownership and control on the content cannot be applicable in the online context where the users control the communication process. Accordingly, the citizen journalists, click and mortar companies and the dot-coms jointly dictate the contents and other dynamics of information on theInternet as joint owners of the medium.

Contents are typically generated by the users resulting in the decentralization of news processing or the democratization of the media and a previously passive audience is now gaining enormous power and control to select only topics and sources they are interested in. Collectively they have disrupted the hegemony of media houses as gatekeepers of news, agenda-setters of public discussions, authoritarian custodians of information and rather highlighted the users' power of selectivity.

Beyond active user participation, other receiver related modifications include increased audience fragmentation. Resulting from the myriad of available online information outlets, the media audience has become highly fragmented clusters, as online communities align into groups and subgroups of people who share common interests, experiences or backgrounds. Audience fragmentation emphasizes further the inapplicability of the hypodermic needle theory in the contemporary media landscape. The magic bullet theory, as it is also called, is based on the assumption of a mass society where everyone receives the same messages from the media which produce the same direct effect on them. The selectivity theories and the two-way theory have always been used to counter such expectations. Online audience fragmentation further refutes this argument of a direct mass society effect of communication.

Consequently, a monolithic and passive audience as depicted by the early models is, therefore, flawed in online communication. However, from Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) perspectives, the communication process models of the early days, exemplified in Westley

and MacLean's 1957 model, also implied a passive role for the media. 'The channel idea suggests that the media are nothing more than pipes or conduits through which bits of information flow – neutral transmitters of messages linking senders to receivers' (p. 33). A channel approach to the media assumes that 'nothing important happens to the message while it is in the channel. Any message effects on the audience results from source or audience characteristics and not the channel' (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, p. 34). Such media (channel) passivity approach negates Marshall McLuhan's theory of medium is the message. 'McLuhan (1964) was the first to suggest that media, independent from any content that is transmitted, impact individuals and society' (Edwards et al. 2013, p. 256).

> We are accustomed to thinking of the message as separate from the medium itself. The medium delivers the message. McLuhan, however, collapsed the distinction between the message and the medium. He saw them as one and the same…. We focus on the content and overlook the medium - even though content doesn't exist outside of the way it is mediated (Griffin 2009, pp. 312-313).

Yet online communications re-emphasize that the medium is the message as the same message shared on different online platforms often get users responding differently depending on the channel differences and contexts of the communication. Users' interaction with a post on Whatsapp group may differ significantly from the same users interacting with the same message posted on Facebook or shared on a news forum.

Another approach to observing these Internet-induced alterations to communication is from the dimension of progressive notions of communication theories and models. Shannon and Weaver's 1949 transmission model of communication was one of the earliest explanations of the communication process that involves five elements: a *sender* who transfers a *message* linearly through a *channel* to a *receiver* amidst some *noise* interferences. Harold Laswell's 1948 model of who said what, in what channel, to whom and with what effect, was also a linear model. Schramm's 1954 interaction model introduced *feedback* and *field of experience* as an improvement that communication can be interactional and adaptive as the receiver makes sense of the communication, responds to it depending on his or her perceptions, background or attitude (field of experience). Yet, like the transmission model, the interaction model 'treats senders and receivers as fundamentally separate and disconnected' (Edwards et al. 2013, p.15), a disadvantage that was corrected by the transaction model which presents communication participants as simultaneous sender-receivers linked in relationship to one another. The social construction model of communication sees senders and receivers as communication participants who jointly create or construct meaning of the social world (Edwards et al. 2009). Irrespective of their roles as senders or receivers, communicators construct and negotiate the meaning of social reality. Collaboratively their communication activities shape what eventually become our perceptions of reality.

This discourse on the developmental stages of communication models or metaphors is very relevant in this discussion. With most conventional media, it is very easy to place them in each of these stages of communication growth as they progressed from one model to another. For example, with the print and broadcast media, there was a time communication process ended with media organizations transferring information to receivers. With time, the audience opinions were sought through avenues like letters to the editor or phone in during talk shows. These changes moved communication from merely being linear transmission to being also participatory and interactional, though limitedly. On the contrary, by its very

nature, the Internet from its inception has always been a collaborative medium encouraging the engagement and involvement of all the participants.

Thus, the Internet started from its very beginning to redefine the elements of the mass communication process (Baran 2012). These revised ways of describing communication have been aptly articulated by contemporary authors. For example, in Verderber and Verderber (2008), 'Communication is the process of creating or sharing meaning in informal conversation, group interaction, or public speaking' (p. 4). 'Communication is the collaborative process of using messages to create and participate in social reality' (Edwards, et al. 2013, p.7).

Other changes relating to the communication process
Beyond modifications related to communication components and developments, it is also imperative to discuss other Internet-orchestrated changes that affect the communication process.

1. From inverted pyramid news format to modular content presentation:
   In the mainstream media, hard stories are usually written in the inverted pyramid format and the audience members are also expected to access the information in that order to get a quick glimpse of the story's main idea. In online news writing, the modular content format allows users to access stories in parts following whatever order appeals to them. Therefore, online news organizations provide their contents as individual pieces of information (modules).The implication is that reporters gather and store bits of information with the intent to combine or recombine the bits into any number of different forms. The modular content format is an attempt by media organizations to adapt to changing audience habits by making individual pieces of information available separately and adaptable to different users and devices (Fohust, 2011). This is opposed to the inverted pyramid that assumes that both the writer and the reader must start with the lead.

2. The disappearance of the news hole:
   The news hole concept in traditional journalism emphasizes the need to fit in stories to the limited time (in broadcast) and space (print) which leads also to the transiency of contents. This is a non-issue online because there are no time or spatial constraints. Information sources can provide massive contents which can also be available forever without any pressure to replace them with newer contents. Because of the news hole limitation both print and broadcast media houses have to replace the old information with new ones; on the Internet they only have to make updates or add more contents without any pressure to remove old stories since there is unlimited cyberspace.

3. Message personalization with a medium that can communicate at all levels:
   The large and diverse audiences of mass communication result in impersonal communication. On the contrary, the Internet has great opportunities for message personalization in mass communication (Edwards, et al. 2013). An email can be used to send a generic message to a mass audience as well as a personal message to individuals or groups. Similarly, posts on social networking sites can be adapted to communicate personally with individuals, groups or the public. So, apart from the fact that online messages can be customized to serve each user's interest, message personalization also emanates from the premise that online communication is so flexible that most platforms such as email and social media, can be used to reach an individual, a group or a mass audience.

> The thing that makes computer-based communication so powerful is that it includes virtually every level of communication, from the interpersonal communication of email and instant messaging to the mass communication of the World Wide Web… group communication through listservs, newsgroups, and discussion boards (Hanson 2005, p. 272, 291).

The fact that all kinds of communication: interpersonal communication, group discussions and mass communication can all take place on the same Internet channel has led to what (Edwards et al. 2013) referred to as *masspersonal communication*: a blend of the elements of interpersonal and mass communication. 'In the communication age, the many forms of technologically mediated and face-to-face communication overlap and intersect' (Edwards et al. 2013, p. 254).

4. <u>From a communication model of one-to-many to multiple models:</u>
Traditional models of communication process usually take the form of *one to many*, referring to a single sender (usually a media organization) communicating to many receivers (a heterogeneous and anonymous audience). On the Internet, the models are as many as can be imagined: one to one (such as Instant Messaging chats); one to many, many to one, many to many (group Instant Messaging chats, mailing lists interactions, social networking posts and comments, etc. (Edwards et al. 2013, Wood & Smith, 2001).

5. <u>From broadcast to intercast:</u>
On the direction of information flow, in the traditional media, it is a top-down information approach, that is, vertical communication. This contrasts the sideways model or horizontal communication that is applicable online resulting from its conversational format. In the top-down information method, messages are dropped from the organization's hierarchy to a passive or limitedly active and receiving audience. This model stresses the transmission (broadcasting) of information that pushes down news and facts to the audience. On the contrary, the sideways model of online communication emphasizes the exchange of ideas, sharing of information and conversation (intercasting). While the broadcast model transmits or shoves information from top-down, the intercast model encourages a peer-to-peer and social networking form of conversation. This organizational control which characterizes the conventional media results in contents that have been filtered at different checkpoints in the organization as opposed to the sideways information flow on the Internet which is a result of many simultaneous distributed conversations leading to its unfiltered contents (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Subsequently, the advancement is from media organization thrusting out information to the audience, to users who through syndication 'pull out from the sky' only contents they are interested in, expressing such interest with the Internet's subscription application, Really Simple Syndication, (RSS).

This development can also be expressed as a one-way flow of communication that characterized the old media and the two-way or multiple-flow of information of the new media. Discussing the pre-Internet era, Edwards, et al. (2013, p. 256), asserted that 'news and information were released through a highly centralized production – only a few editors had control of informing the public… this one-way communication fostered little participation'. Whereas two-way communication enhanced by the Internet implies that users can respond to messages rather than simply receive them. This progress can be related to the one-step, two-step and multi-step theories. The one-step theory (which posits that the media have a direct influence on the audience) which had been proved an inadequate explanation

of the communication process is even further challenged by the multi-flow of information that operates online. The two-step and multi-step theories (that the media influences through opinion leaders) are more applicable to online communication than the one-step theory. In this context, I agree with Bowman and Willis (2003)'s expression of two-way journalism where the journalist becomes a forum leader or a mediator of the many conversations on the online media.

6. Technical changes:
Greater technical and professional skills are required to function effectively in the digital media landscape. For example, data journalism requires expertise in other areas such as programming and designing, online sites need to appropriately adapt content for online use rather than the *shovelware* practice of transferring content verbatim from the original medium such as print or television to the Internet (Foust, 2011). Similarly, Buzzard (2012) asserted that major changes are essential to address this new environment. Some technological changes such as developing software meters to monitor network traffic, bandwidth usage or track users' search queries; Internet rating services, etc. have all become necessary skills and opportunities in the communication world.

7. The emergence of a new communication environment
The Internet came with its unique terminologies such as uploading, downloading, networking, chatting, unfriending, twitting, googling, skyping, pinging, surfing, smileys, emoticons, hashtag, tablet, digital natives, digital immigrants, browsers, applications, the list is endless. User generated content and Web 2.0, for example, are terms used to emphasize the participatory nature of online communication by active *users*. Knowledge blogging or *Klogging* refers to the application of weblogs for knowledge management. '*Glocalization* is the capacity of the Internet to expand users' social worlds to faraway people and simultaneously connect them more deeply to the place where they live' (Bowman & Willis 2003, p. 39). The authors observed thatglocalization is generating a whole lot of new social capital. On the Internet users find contacts with similar interests, visions, or goals irrespective of their locations. They also use the Internet to enhance their connections and interactions with groups and people they already know.

New styles of communicating also spring up. For instance, during a lecture or public speech instead of several focused eyes, nods, facial expressions or other nonverbal forms of communicating approval or disapproval, the speaker now gets feedback of heads bent down with deep concentration fumbling with technological devices. S/he may be uncertain whether they are processing the speech on their devices, reacting to the speech on social media platforms, transferring them to online destinations, or even engrossed in other activities on the devices. Nearly all forms of human communication and social relationships take new forms of expression.

There are also new ways of communicating (such as chatting, pinging, video calling, conference calls, etc.), new places to communicate (Google Hangout, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.,) and new avenues of interaction unfold at a rapid pace. Innovative linguistic styles are generated so fast that it is really difficult to keep up with the pace at which slangs, emoticons and acronym-generated expressions slide into circulation. Notably, these emergent new linguistic styles on social media networking sites deviate from Standard English spellings and grammatical usage. Avoiding any preoccupation with grammatical accuracy and correct spelling of words, social media users prefer to be guided by the vocal pronunciation of words (phonetic spellings), extremely abbreviated and contracted words,

acronym-generated words and all forms of shorthand writings to convey intended meanings. Slangs and smileys are all accepted forms of expression, especially on social media channels. And all these weird usages, though they appear normal to the digital natives, now seem to enjoy universal acceptance and understanding irrespective of race, language, age and culture. Consequently, such sentences which are loaded with incorrect spellings, highly contracted words, abbreviations, acronym-generated words, slangs, smileys, which would make any editor jump from his seat as meaningless writing, flood many social media sites.

Ohiagu and Okorie's (2014) study found that these new forms of writing also spill into offline communications as many young people end up writing some of these non-standard forms of writing in serious and professional writings whether advertently or inadvertently. This confirms the applicability of the reflective-projective theory to online communication.The reflective-projective theory of Lee Loevinger proposes that the media merely 'reflect the society, by reproducing societal norms and values while the society, in turn, assimilates and replicates the values and virtues presented by the media' (Ohiagu &Okorie 2014, p. 97). Applying this to the online context, Ohiagu and Okorie's (2014), study found that although social media contents are influenced by societal values and norms, they also shape and transmit culture:

> Social media interactions contribute significantly to the production and circulation of popular cultural expressions in the virtual world… through the construction and popularization of slangs and new linguistic styles which are understandable to most online users across borders…We could not but support Lee Loevinger's postulation of reflective social media that mirror societal values and are influenced by the society which they influence (pp. 106-107).

All these evolutionary stages of communication discussed in this paper could also be viewed from Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovation lens. Apart from the fact that people generally adopt technological inventions at different pace, by their very nature communication technologies evolve to serve new purposes necessitating transitions in their uses or applications. The Internet is not only being used differently from the time of invention to the contemporary age by both the media organizations and the users, but it is also commanding a revolutionary use of all the other media of communication which find new forms of usage on the Internet. It is also changing the entire way of how we communicate resulting in new ways of understanding communication. Its *always evolving* nature is thus, affecting not only itself but also all other media of communication

Other theoretical implications of this discourse
1. <u>Media richness theory:</u>
Daft and Lengel in 1984 developed the theory of media richness which advocates that a communication channel needs to be matched to the content of the information it carries. Media richness, defined as the medium's capacity to carry information, is measured by the medium's ability to personalize the message it transmits, speed of feedback as well asavailability of multiple cues and language variety. The whole essence of the media richness theory is to enhance communication effectiveness by reducing ambiguity through richer medium selection for message delivery. By considering the media's richness, a very ambiguous message needs to be matched with a rich medium and a straightforward message may be relayed through a lean medium to avoid overkill or information overload. Emphasis is on the appropriate media choice of the sender to achieve effective communication (Dainton&Zelley 2011).

Based on the four listed criteria, this paper has demonstrated above that most online platforms provide the opportunity for instantaneous feedback, are easily personalized and can accommodate multiple clues and languages. Against this premise, one can hypothesize that the Internet is perhaps one of the richest media of communication.As observed above, the medium is so adaptable to all levels of communication and all kinds of use that its many platforms can be selected accordingly to match most messages. This thesis, of course, does not suggest that the Internet can be the right medium to convey all kinds of messages, rather it is an argument that ranging from e-mail, instant messaging, social media posts, blogs, video conferencing/calls etc., the communicator has unrivalled and numerous opportunities to match the medium to the message. Depending on the desired effect, the nature of the message, the target audience and other dynamics, the communicator can choose which Internet channel can appropriately deliver a message. Apart from enhancing the media richness theory, another emerging point in this discourse is that perhaps rather than seeing e-mail, instant messaging, social media, blogs, etc. as merely Internet platforms, resources, features, applications, etc. it is time to qualify them separately as individual media channels. So, rather than group all of them as one medium (the Internet), we could begin to classify them individually as various Internet-enabled media. But are we not already implying this by the use of social media – different media channels for social interactions?

2. <u>Uses and gratifications theory</u>:
   While the thrust of the media richness theory is on the sender's choice of medium in relation to the message, the uses and gratifications theory places emphasis on the media choice of the receiver. The uses and gratifications theory is credited to Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973)'s study which concluded that media audiences use the media to satisfy their various needs. It postulates that from the myriad of media options available to them to satisfy personal needs, media users *actively* make specific media choices to gratify their needs for information, entertainment, reinforcement of personal identity and social interaction (Dainton&Zelley 2011). Thus, a basic assumption of the theory as envisioned by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) is that 'audience members actively use various media to fulfil certain needs or goals. This media usage isn't passive, involuntary, coerced' (Dainton&Zelley 2011, p.166).

   This paper's treatise on the online users' active participation and freedom of media choice heavily gives credence to the uses and gratifications theory. Dainton and Zelly, (2011, p.166), made a similar observation, though regarding communication technologies generally. 'Today's mass media represent numerous options available to fulfil a person's social or psychological needs and values. Indeed, the increase of communication technologies available to people in the 21st century only increases the viability of the notion of choice' (Dainton&Zelley, 2011, p. 166). The Internet provides a plethora of media choices for gratifying nearly all human needs and goals. It also enhances the possibility of users who can actively make specific media choices. And it can be argued that many online users employ the Internet differently to satisfy their various needs: for prompt news (Twitter), education (Google), information and entertainment (Facebook), to mention but a few examples. Besides, various individual users also use the same online platform to gratify different needs. For example, a group of students can engage in academic discussions on Google Hangout while another group can use it as an entertainment forum. Nearly all the channels of the Internet are adaptable to various uses. Hence, the Internet strongly endorses the uses and gratifications theory.

3. <u>Spiral of silence theory:</u>
The spiral of silence theory,attributed to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann onexpression of public opinion,believes that people generally don't share their views when they fear their opinions contradict that of the majority (Griffin 2009). The media accelerate the spiral of silence which primarily arises from the fear of isolation. Griffin also highlights that people usually are more inclined to align with a winner or a popular opinionin order not to be labelled deviant especially on significant issues. They prefer bandwagon labels to isolation or social stigmas that may result from expressing contrary thoughts. Any form of sanctioned public ridicule or avoidance, imposed long-term solitary confinement or outright banishment from the groupwhich may come from non-conformity with the public opinion are not acceptable in many societies.

> Noelle-Neumann says that only the criminal or moral hero doesn't care what society thinks. The rest of us want the peace and contentment that come from belonging. Noelle-Neumann believes that the media accelerates the muting of the minority in the spiral of silence … by providing the sanctioned view of what everyone else is thinking (pp. 374-375).

So, some of the basic assumptions of the theory are that viewswhich correspond with the influential media are often overrated or hyped; popular opinions are more likely to be expressedthanthose held by the minority; people are more willing to share their thoughts with others of like mindsthan with those who disagree (Griffin, 2009).

Although objective critiques are identifying some flaws of this theory, such as other motivations that could make people choose to be silent other than those suggested by Noelle-Neumann (Griffin 2009), yet this theory also deserves to be tested in the online environment since observation of comments and reactions on social networking sites many times reveal bandwagon tendencies. A good number of social media users seem to align their comments with what they regard as popular opinion, either to avoid sanctioned public ridicule or isolation while minorities express deviant views. Except on political discussions where it seems people generally express their views irrespective of how absurd they are, in most other discussions, conformity is more likely. However, since there is also usually a myriad of opinions, the hesitancy to express minority views may dwindle because most views will get supporters except if the thinking is too weird. Then the speed of communication and feedback may not always provide the necessary time to gauge public sentiment and opinion before an online user expresses an opinion. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate how the spiral of silence operates in the online environment.

4. <u>The Cultivation theory:</u>
The assumption of the cultivation theory of George Gerbner (1998) is that heavy viewing of violence (or anything) will affect the audience's perception of social reality. According to Dainton and Zelley (2011), some scholars have applied the cultivation theory beyond violence (Nabi 2009; Gentles & Harrison, 2006) while others have tested its application in print media (Park 2008; Vergeer, Lubbers &Scheepers (2000). This theory prompts lots of questions. For example, do Internet users also view the societyaccording to the dominant portrayal of social reality in the Internet channels they use consistently? Does the Internet distort users' attitudes about people and the world? To what extent would heavy Internet usage influence users' perception of social reality? Given its many platforms with a myriad of channel options, can assessing different packets of information on the Internet lead to a

cultivation effect? Is there a possibility of a dominant portrayal of a social reality on the net given its nature?

5. <u>The agenda-setting theory:</u>
McComb and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory postulatedthat the media selectively determine the news agenda. 'By selecting, excluding, emphasizing and elaborating certain aspects of the news, public opinions are shaped and influenced. Thus, the news media influence their audiences to think about selected issues in a certain light' (Dainton&Zelley, 2011, p. 172). With the onset of citizen journalism where ordinary citizens are involved in selecting and emphasizing what events are reported as news, how tenable is this theory? Can the online users be described as partakers in the responsibility of determining what issues are brought to public attention?

The reflections made in this paper are not exhaustive. Many other new-media-relevant theories could not be addressed here due to space constraints such as the democratic participant media, technological determinism, media dependency and the play theories to mention but a few.

Conclusion
So, online communication many times reveals patterns of communication that differ in some aspects from the conventional communication patterns in which we were trained. They present additional opportunities and challenges for communication scholars and professionals, necessitate a review of some communication theories and raise the question of how these shifts can be applied to contemporary teaching and learning of communication. Online communication has been presented in this discourse as apparently reinforcing some communication theories such as media richness; uses and gratifications; medium is the message; diffusion of innovations; and selectivity theories. In contrasts, some communication theories such as the gatekeeping, agenda-setting, authoritarian, hypodermic needle theories as well as Shannon and Weaver transmission model are deflated or merely weakened. Others like the spiral of silence, cultivation effect theories need to be re-experimented in online contexts.

Recommendations
1. Academic institutions offering communication ought toadjust their curricula toequip students with the capabilityto work proficiently in the new media setting.

1. It is suggested that communication scholars carry out empirical studies to verify the relevance or otherwise of some communications theories as hinted in this paper.

1. Communication professionals need to beef up their knowledge of the fast-changing tools needed to function effectively in the digital media arena.

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