

Core Theories for the Teaching of Local Democracy

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ABSTRACT

A discipline such as Public Administration and Management is defined by its theoretical pillars or foundations. To remain relevant these pillars should be supported by theories, which are often borrowed from other related sciences such as Communication Sciences. These theoretical pillars should form the basis for the teaching of a discipline. To thus convey the multidisciplinary nature and complexities associated with subfields within Public Administration and Management - such as local democracy - to students on postgraduate level, requires a sound theoretical basis.

From a systems perspective it is the purpose of this article to cluster twenty core theories appropriate for the study and teaching of local democracy. Teaching theories are critical for analysis, synthesis, and comparisons of issues such as the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, community profiling, political representivity, communication strategies, democratic accountability, municipal-community partnerships, and voter empowerment. The article concludes that theory enables the mastery of a subject. Theoretical underpinnings provide scholars with the tools to organise and understand phenomena under discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discipline such as Public Administration and Management are defined and maintained by their theoretical pillars or foundations. To remain relevant, these pillars should be supported by theories, which are often borrowed from other related sciences such as Communication Sciences.

To convey the multidisciplinary nature and complexities associated with local democracy as subfield within Public Administration and Management to students requires a sound theoretical basis. In a local democracy context teaching theories are critical for analysis, synthesis, and comparisons of issues such as the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, community profiling, political representivity, communication strategies, democratic accountability, municipal-community partnerships, and voter empowerment.

The systems theory is appropriate for theoretical clustering since the unit of analysis is not a construct, but rather a relationship – between people and environments. The systems theory focuses on the transaction nature of communication, which implies mutual causality among the parts of the system (interdependency).

It is the primary purpose of this article to explore core theories appropriate for the teaching of local democracy. The secondary purpose is to illustrate the need to transfer sound theoretical underpinnings or foundations of the discipline Public

Administration and Management to postgraduate students to enable them to explore, to predict, to analyse, and to develop new theories to further stimulate debate and growth in the discipline.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEORIES AS PILLARS FOR A DISCIPLINE

Over time scholars have built on the thinking of earlier scholars, elaborating on their core concepts, descriptions and theories. These theories were later 'clustered' to inform a specific study domain or area. Without these theories it would be virtually impossible to debate the merits and demerits of particular paradigms to analyse phenomena.

2.1 The concept 'theory'

The word theory has a number of distinct meanings in different fields of disciplines or knowledge domains, depending on the methodologies utilised and the context of observation.

The concept originates from Greek "theoria" which means "contemplation" or "speculation" (Mullins, 1973). In this sense, a theory is a systematic and formalized expression of all previous observations, and is predictive, logical and testable. In principle, scientific theories are always tentative, and subject to corrections or inclusion in a yet wider theory. According to Botha (1990:29-33) a theory is any scientific attempt to describe, explain or interpret the reality or something within that reality. Fox and Meyer (1995:128) in turn describe a theory as an explanation of reality in order to be able to make a prediction. Odi (1982:313) adds to this and described theory as "an internally connected and logically consistent proposition about relationship(s) between phenomena".

Over time scholars developed classifications or levels of theories. These levels should be seen as a continuum ranging from the most simple to the more sophisticated, complex levels of theory. Grover and Glazier (1986:233-235) differentiate between the following levels:

- *Substantive theory*: a set of propositions, which furnish an explanation for an applied area of inquiry
- *Formal theory*. a set of propositions, which furnish an explanation for a formal or conceptual area of inquiry, that is, a discipline.
- *Generalizations*: typically more data connected than grand theory or paradigms.
- *Grand theory*: a set of theories or generalizations that transcend the borders of disciplines to explain relationships among phenomena.
- *Paradigm*: a framework of basic assumptions with which perceptions are evaluated and relationships [and values] are delineated and applied to a discipline or profession.
- *World view*: an individual's accepted knowledge, including values and assumptions, which provide a 'filter' for perception of all phenomena.

It should be noted that these levels of theory introduce an individual's perspective in contrast to broader social perspectives. Thus, theory to clarify phenomena has both

individual and social perspectives. Different theories are developed because individual and social contexts differ.

3. THE VALUE OF THEORIES FOR THE TEACHING OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

In 1967 Glaser and Strauss proposed that the role of theory is to enable explanation and prediction of behaviour, and to guide research. This is intended to help scholars gain a conceptual understanding of the nature of research as a process within a theoretical context.

As was stated earlier, the construction of good theories is a major goal of science. For scholars in local democracy it is important to understand that there can be many theories on this topic. Students need to understand the content of these theories to enable them to form a holistic perspective on the diverse perspectives within the study domain. They should also be able to understand why different people use different approaches or perspectives.

A critical point is that in the absence of well-articulated theories, neither qualitative nor quantitative research data have much meaning. Research findings thus have little scientific sense when they are presented outside the context of a particular theory or particular theories in combination.

3.1 Local democracy as subfield within Public Administration and Management

Public Administration and Management theory is the amalgamation of history, organisational theory, social theory, political theory and related studies focused on the meanings, structures and functions of public service in all its forms. A standard course of study often recounts major historical foundations for the study of government as well as epistemological issues associated with public service as a profession and as an academic field.

The study of Public Administration and Management is complicated by the fact that social phenomena are so complex that they are typically neither explainable nor understandable with the analysis of logically arranged concepts and variables. The discipline can best be thought of as a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving the spheres of interaction, interdependence, and collaboration that include the governmental, political, economic, technological, legal, social, and cultural contexts. Study is further complicated by highly dynamic issues such as changing local conditions, globalisation, and information technology and knowledge sharing. Students thus need theories to assist them in their quest for understanding phenomena around them and in this way, they may gain a more complete understanding of issues (Bedeian, 1998).

In his article entitled “The Study of Administration” (1887), Woodrow Wilson addressed the question of the distinctiveness of administration in a political milieu. This question is still very much at the heart of Public Administration today. Early scholars such as Gulick and Urwick (1937), Weber (1947), Waldo (1948), and Simon (1957) focused on the complex relationship between politics and administration. After

the Second World War the study field expanded to include a variety of other topics, such as policy analysis, good governance, transparency, ethics, conflict management theory, the effectiveness of government, and accountability to and representation of the people (participation), to mention but a few.

Local democracy as study area within Public Administration and Management is a multidisciplinary area whose boundaries are ever evolving to embrace developments in various related disciplines such as Political Sciences, Communication Sciences, Development Studies, and Sociology. Within these boundaries fundamental questions regarding issues such as local democracy, public participation, and communication strategies are embedded. To answer these and other questions, various models were developed for understanding the flow of information from a government agency to citizenry (Cobley 1996:1; Dervin & Voigt, 1989:viii). Collectively these theories outline Public Administration and Management as a science.

4. LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN PERSPECTIVE

The interrelationship between politics, communication and a democracy has been studied from various perspectives (McNair, 2003; Street, 2001; Savigny, 2002). In a democracy political communication is at the centre of the collection of political-relevant information and the emergence of proposals for legislative action (Powell & Cowart, 2003:3). To promote and maintain such an interrelationship on local government level requires comprehensive communication strategies which include the utilization of various mechanisms and structures to facilitate the flow of information between citizens and local government structures (Fletcher, 1999:125; Savigny, 2002:6).

As local government in South Africa lack sufficient capacities, efforts to promote good local governance need to include the participation of local civil society. For good governance to be sustainable, it requires partnerships between government and civil society (Manin, 1997:45). Local officials and political representatives, such as councillors, rely on citizen input to stay informed about public concerns as well as to gain insight into citizen preferences. When the flow of information is from the electorate to the decision-maker, citizen participation is occurring (OECD, 2001:3). When well-organized, citizens and interest groups can have a powerful influence on the outcome of decisions (Wissink, 1990; Van Houten, 1992).

Democracy can be regarded as the framework where human rights, individual freedom and equality can prosper. Meaningful democracy requires local governments to be open about what they do and ready to account for their actions (Young, 2000:67; Valderrama & Hamilton, 1999:98). On local level, democracy entails the allocation and distribution of public goods according to the preferences and needs of the people (Pratchett & Wilson, 1996:46). For this 'grassroot' democracy to materialise citizens have to be given some role in these processes. This role is usually defined in democratic structures, political culture and participatory processes.

There is reasonable consensus that local democracy is highly multi-dimensional in nature (Madron & Jopling, 2002; Pratchett & Wilson, 1996). King and Stoker (1996:45) and Lutz and Linder (2002:6) indicate that local democracy should be studied from various perspectives. These perspectives indicate the multi-dimensional

nature and complexity of local democracy, and include aspects such as political representation, governability, conflict resolution, minority rights, and accountability

The complexity of local democracy is further highlighted by the seemingly endless list of variables that could influence the effectiveness and efficiency thereof. Some of these variables include:

- General knowledge of citizens regarding government affairs
- General knowledge regarding existing policies and by-laws
- General knowledge regarding the normative and formative systems of government
- The attitude of public officials regarding citizen participation
- The degree of organisation of participation (mechanisms, policies, procedures, etc.)
- The degree to which decision-making is governed by strict regulations
- The hierarchy of decisions.

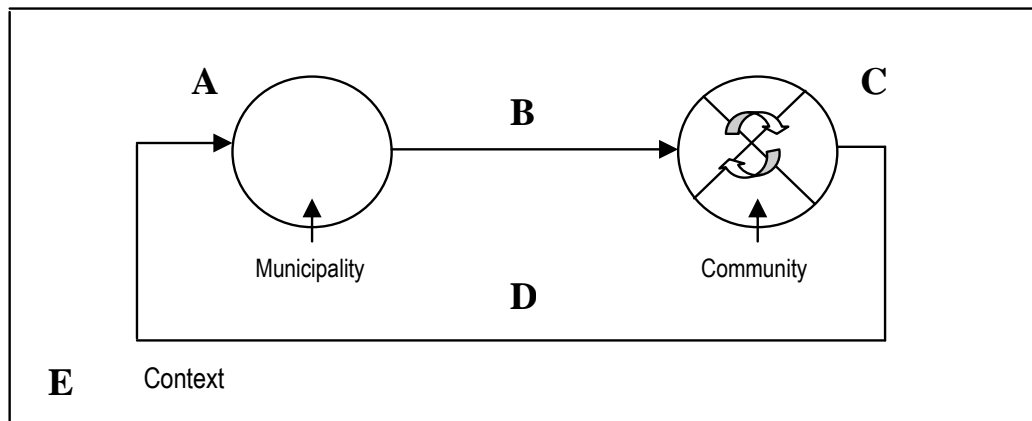
Thinkers and activists have recently focused on the importance of citizenship action and civic engagement (Manin, 1997; Walker, 1997; Hill, 2003). This is where citizens actively engage in governance and politics for a broader social good. Participation in decision-making is central to enable people to claim their democratic rights. Effective participation requires that the voices and interests of the poor are taken into account when decisions are made and that poor people are empowered to hold policy makers accountable. Lowndes (1995:71) and Mhone and Edigheji (2003:223), however, postulate that grassroots demands for participation in local government affairs are not always met with sympathetic responses. Bureaucratic institutions may harbour an authoritarian mindset and hence may discourage participation. This will inevitably risk local government remaining distant from rather than being closer to the people (Steifel & Wolfe, 1994).

5. A SYSTEMS MODEL TO CONTEXTUALISE THEORIES FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Models are often developed as a way to provide a scientific or social scientific explanation of phenomena. Stogdill (In Borman, 1980:38) in this regard suggested that model-building involves the ability to observe events and determine the factors operating in the system, the ability to define each factor so others can identify the same dimensions, and the ability to perceive the relationships among the different dimensions.

Within this context of model-building the model below (Fig.1) is based on systems theory, which suggests that organisations are part of a system within larger and smaller systems with which it interacts. Katz and Kahn (1978:52) in this regard are of the opinion that organisations should have an open system perspective towards their operating environment and strive to achieve equilibrium with this environment. This suggests that the open system organisation will change and adapt in order for the organisation to survive within its environment (see Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 1992:85-86; Lubbe & Puth, 1994:41).

Fig. 1 A systems model for the teaching of local democracy



The reason why the systems theory was selected is the fact that in terms of the systems approach, the unit of analysis is not a construct, an event in isolation, but rather a *relationship* – between people, and between people and environments. The assumption is that the fostering of local democracy is dependent on and maintained by meanings (socio-political information) shared by people who belong to the system. Furthermore, systems theory focuses on the *transaction* nature of communication, going beyond mere interaction between sender and receivers. Transaction implies mutual causality among the parts of the system, that is, *interdependency* (see Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 1992:83).

Systems Theory thus serves as the overarching macro theory whilst the other selected theories (as depicted in the model synopsis below) feature on the meso and micro levels within the Systems Theory.

5.1 Model Synopsis: Clusters and Selected Theories

Each cluster or area within the systems model is identified by a letter (A-E). Below appropriate theories per cluster are identified. Each theory, in turn, is numbered (e.g. A1- A3) to facilitate the explanation of each in the next section.

Cluster	Explanation	Selected Theories
A	Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation Theory (A1) • Adaptive Structuration Theory (A2) • Contingency Theory (A3)
B & D	<p>(B) Flow of information from the municipality through a medium to the community</p> <p>(D) Feedback: flow of political-related information from community to the municipality through various media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Exchange Theory (B1) • Media Richness Theory (B2) • Medium Theory (B3) • Dependency Theory (B4) • Argumentation Theory (B5) • Expectancy Value Theory (B6) • Social Penetration Theory (B7) • Dialogic Communication Theory (B8)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive Dissonance Theory (B9) • Priming and Framing (B10) • Hypodermic Needle Theory (B11) • Cultivation Theory (B12) • Gatekeeping Theory (B13) • Agenda Setting Theory (B14)
C	Community consisting of various role-players, stakeholders and segments. Continuous interaction between these role-players, stakeholders and segments leads to socio-political dynamics in municipal governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge Gap Theory (C1) • Muted Group Theory (C2) • Spiral of Silence Theory (C3)
E	Socio-political context within which democratic processes occur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems Theory (E1)

In the next section the selected theories (A1 – E1), as indicated in the model, will be highlighted.

6. EXPOSITION OF SELECTED THEORIES

The systems model above highlights the ‘positions’ or ‘places’ where selected theories are relevant to explain interaction between organisations (municipalities) and stakeholders (the community). These theories are clarified in ‘clusters’ below.

6.1 Organisational (Municipal) context

To explain the organisational context of municipalities (represented by ‘A’ in the model) as locus of this article, and to highlight the theories appropriate to foster local democracy, Organisation Theory (A1), the Adaptive Structuration Theory (A2), and the Contingency Theory (A3) will be utilised.

A1. *Organisation Theory*

Organisation theory offers a wide variety of useful perspectives, including the resource-based view, the knowledge-based view, strategic choice theory, agency theory, institutional theory, and systems theory. Among the theories that are or have been most influential are the Weberian organisation theory, Marxist organisation analysis, Scientific management (mainly following Frederick Taylor’s Human Relations Studies), Administrative theories (with work by e.g. Henri Fayol and Chester Barnard), and Contingency theory (Williamson, 1995).

Organisational Information Theory argues that the main activity of organisations is the process of making sense of equivocal information. Organisational members accomplish this sense-making process through enactment, selection, and retention of information. It surveys the ways in which management seeks to shape organisation

(i.e. municipal) structure and design in order to achieve efficiency and effectiveness (West & Turner, 2000:244; Holloway, 1992).

A2. *The Adaptive Structuration Theory*

Theorists supporting the structuration perspective argue that groups and organisations create structures, which can be interpreted as an organisation's rules and resources. These structures, in turn, create social systems in an organisation. Structuration theorists are of the opinion that groups and organisations develop a unique character and culture because of the way their members utilize their structures (Desantis & Poole, 1994:132). This is significant since municipalities are characterised by highly developed power structures along political lines (Desantis & Poole, 1994:133).

A3. *Contingency Theory*

Contingency theory refers to any of a number of management theories. The core of the Contingency theory is that influences from the internal and external environments of organisations will, to a large extent, influence decision-making.

From a local democracy perspective the processes of democracy is influenced by many internal and external constraints from the municipality and its subsystems. Windahl, Signitzer and Olson (1992:85-86) point to the necessity of awareness of the internal and external factors; only then can facilitators of democratic processes decide what is the most effective way of communicating in a certain situation.

Next, focus will fall on the theories relevant to the analysis of information exchange (that is, from sender to receiver through a medium).

6.2 Information Exchange

Based on the simple open systems model information flow from the municipality through a medium to the community (process 'B'). In return the community as receiver respond to this information and provide feedback to the municipality (process 'D'). The most significant theories related to this sending and receiving of information through a medium are highlighted below.

B1. *Social Exchange Theory*

The Social Exchange Theory argues that the major force in interpersonal relationships is the satisfaction of both people's self-interest. According to Michener (2004:67) the theory posits that all human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. This implies that, when a citizen perceives the costs of relationship as outweighing the perceived benefits, then the theory predicts that the citizen will choose to leave the relationship (thus, not participate in democratic processes).

B2. *Media Richness Theory*

First proponents of the theory were made by Daft and Lengel (1984) who propose that communication media have varying capacities for resolving ambiguity, negotiating

varying interpretations, and facilitating understanding (Galbraith, 1977; Daft & Lengel, 1988:225-232).

Utilised within the context of local democracy, this theory would suggest that a municipality should use a variety of media or mediums to convey and distribute political relevant information to the community to optimise penetration of the message.

B3. *Medium Theory*

With the medium theory (also known as channel theory) McLuhan (1964) stressed how channels differ, not only in terms of their content, but also in regard to how they awaken and alter thoughts and senses. In medium theory, a medium is not simply a newspaper, the Internet, a digital camera and so forth. Rather, it is the symbolic environment of any communicative act. Media, apart from whatever content is transmitted, impact individuals and society (McLuhan, 1978:54-60).

Applied to the context of local democracy, it would imply that the socio-political (symbolic) context within which certain political-related information is conveyed, should be considered.

B4. *Dependency Theory*

Media depends on the social context (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Dependency theory proposes an integral relationship among audiences, media and the larger social system. This theory predicts that people depend on media information to meet certain needs and achieve certain goals, like uses-and-gratifications theory (Littlejohn, 1999:353). The more alternatives individuals had for gratifying needs, the less dependent they will become on any single medium.

B5. *Argumentation Theory*

According to Van Eemeren *et al.* (1996) argumentation is a verbal and social activity. Argumentation is always related to a standpoint. It applies to group interaction and, as such, has application within the context of local democracy – especially to illustrate the possibilities of argumentation analysis in the context of public (political) information.

B6. *Expectancy Value Theory*

Expectancy Value Theory suggests that people orient themselves to the world according to their expectations (beliefs) and evaluations. According to this Theory, behaviour is a function of the expectancies one has and the value of the goal toward which one is working (Palmgreen, 1984).

Applied to the context of local democracy it would mean that the combination of beliefs and evaluations developed about a communication strategy, the content, or a specific medium could be either positive or negative. If positive, it is likely that the municipality would continue to use that media choice; if negative, then they would avoid it.

B7. *Social Penetration Theory*

The Social Penetration Theory maintains that interpersonal relationships evolve in some gradual and predictable fashion (Griffin, 1997:145). The social penetration theory is an important aspects in relational development. Applied to the context of local democracy, it would mean that a municipality cannot effectively collaborate with the community towards some common end unless they 'know' one another. This implies that a relationship or partnership must be built and maintained to foster local democracy.

B8. *Dialogic Communication Theory*

Dialogue is "a relation between persons that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion" (Buber, 1997). Inclusiveness is an acknowledgment of the other person, an event experienced between two persons, mutual respect for both views and a willingness to listen to the views of the other (Arnett, 1986:6).

Applied to the context of this article it is important for all parties involved to know when political communication has served to strengthen relationships between people and expand role-player and stakeholder viewpoints.

B9. *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, a theory about attitude formation and change, argues that the experience of dissonance (or incompatible beliefs and actions) is aversive and people are highly motivated to avoid it. In their efforts to avoid feelings of dissonance, people will avoid hearing views that oppose their own, change their beliefs to match their actions, and seek reassurance after making a difficult decision (Griffin, 1997). Information and situations may increase the dissonance (Trenholm & Jensen, 1996). Since Dissonance Theory applies to all situations involving attitude formation and change, this theory is highly applicable to the context of local democracy where municipalities should foster a culture of participation from role-players and stakeholders with different attitudes, opinions and perceptions. Since this theory is about the potential to manipulate people into certain behaviour (i.e. political participation), it is especially relevant to political decision-making.

B10. *Priming and Framing*

Much attention in agenda-setting research focuses on the concept of 'priming' which refers to enhancing the effects of the media by offering the audience a prior context – a context that will be used to interpret subsequent communication. The media serve to provide the audience with standards and frames of reference. Agenda-setting refers mainly to the importance of an issue; priming indicates whether something is 'good' or 'bad', whether it is communicated effectively, and so forth (Scheufele, 2001). This would imply that, in a local democracy context, a municipality should 'prime' the community before they convey political information.

B11. *Hypodermic Needle Theory*

The "hypodermic needle theory" (also known as the 'Magic Bullet Theory') implies that the mass media has a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences. A wide variety of factors contributed to this influence of the media including radio and television, and the persuasive power of advertising and propaganda.

The theory suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response (Berger, 1995:124). Protagonists of this theory express the view that the media is a dangerous means of communicating since the receiver or audience is powerless to resist the impact of the message. The population is seen as a "sitting duck". People are seen as passive and are seen as having a lot media material "shot" at them (Davis & Baron, 1981:23). People end up thinking what they are told because there is no other source of information to verify (Casmir, 1994).

This theory is relevant within the context of local democracy where a certain political party or grouping, who controls the organisational communication media, and, to a lesser extent, the local media, can use its power to influence voter behaviour.

B12. *Cultivation Theory*

Cultivation theory, developed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), focus on the effects of media on listeners/viewers. Cultivation theorists argue that media such as television has long-term effects which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant. Cultivation theory in its most basic form, suggests that the media is responsible for shaping, or 'cultivating' viewers' conceptions of social reality.

In a political context the Cultivation Theory is significant since it focus on the mass media as a socializing agent and investigates whether television viewers come to believe the television version of reality the more they watch it.

B13. *Gate-keeping Theory*

In a communication context the 'gatekeeper' is the person who decides what shall pass through each gate section, and therefore regulate the flow of information. The gatekeeper decides which information will go forward, and which will not (Berkowitz, 1990:57; Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 1992:125).

Gate-keeping can become a way to reduce openness in a socio-political system and may result in distrust and extra information-finding efforts on the part of people in the system. The community, as recipient of political-relevant information may complain when dealing with gate-keeping (i.e. from political representatives and ward committees) about too little information or that they feel uneasy about what information is eliminated from the overall offering.

B14. *Agenda Setting Theory*

Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media – the ability to tell people what issues are important. Agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995:96). According to McCombs and Shaw (1972:177-178) and Griffin (2000:309)

the media are not always successful at telling people what to think, but they are quite successful at telling people what to think about. This theory is effective at explaining why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same political issues.

This concludes the synopses of the communication theories applicable to information exchange (i.e. from municipality to community and back). Next, the theories associated with information absorption and exchange will be highlighted.

6.3 Community: Information absorption and exchange

As far as information absorption and exchange are concerned, the following 3 theories will be explained:

- Knowledge Gap Theory (C1)
- Muted Group Theory (C2)
- Spiral of Silence Theory (C3)

C1. *Knowledge Gap Theory*

According the Knowledge Gap Theory the increase of information in society is not evenly acquired by every member of society: people with higher socioeconomic status tend to have better ability to acquire information (Weng, 2000). This leads to a division of two groups: a group of better-educated people who know more about most things, and those with low education who know less (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970). The knowledge gap can result in an increased gap between people of lower and higher socio-economic status.

In a local democracy context a municipality, presenting information, should realize that people of higher socio-economic status get their information in a different way than lower educated people. Education level or socio-economic status makes a difference in knowledge – an issue which should be considered in the developing context of South Africa.

C2. *Muted Group Theory*

Muted Group Theory was designed to explore the experience of a subordinate group, particularly women. In this view, women and other marginalized groups' lack of voice remains "the problem with no name" (Kramarae, 1981). Muted Group Theory maintains that language serves men better than women.

Through the lens of muted group theory, actors in a local democracy setting should make adequate provision for the "muted" groups in the community. The theory provides an explanation of why some groups seem to have a voice and why some do not in society.

C3. *Spiral of Silence Theory*

The theory maintains that mass media work simultaneously with public opinion to silence minority beliefs on cultural issues. A fear of isolation prompts those with

minority views to examine the beliefs of others. Individuals who fear being socially isolated are prone to conform to what they perceive to be a majority view (Glynn, Hayes & Shanahan, 1997:456). The phrase "spiral of silence" refers to how people tend to remain silent when they feel that their views are in the minority. Shifts in public opinion occur commonly and therefore this theory is used to search an explanation for political behaviour.

This concludes the exposition of the information absorption and exchange theories.

6.4 Context of Information Exchange (Local Democracy)

The Systems Theory (E1) is used to contextualise information exchange in a particular socio-political setting. Although the Systems Theory, as macro theory, was already discussed in heading 4, a further more detailed explanation is necessary.

E1. *Systems Theory*

The basic idea of systems theory, first used by L. von Bertalanffy (1968), is that the whole equals more than the sum of its parts. The theory deals with wholes made up of interdependent parts, the relationships between parts, and the relationships between the wholes and their environments (Myers & Myers, 1982:47). The relationships are characterised by interdependence; in other words, the interlocking relationships between the parts of a system and the whole system.

Beer (In Fauconnier 1987:100) defines a system as “any cohesive collection of items that are dynamically related”. Thus a system is an organised whole which maintains relations with its environment. Input consists of energy and/or information. If the system interacts with its environment it is an open system (Fauconnier, 1987:100-101; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Applying the systems theory to the context of local democracy it would imply that stakeholders should have an awareness of internal and external factors. Only by obtaining a holistic perspective can political actors decide what is the most effective way of communicating in a certain situation. Windahl, Signitzer and Olson (1992:86) in this regard stress the need for “tailoring the information aspects of organisation to the particular people, tasks, environment, and uncertainty at hand”.

7. CONCLUSION

From a systems perspective it was the purpose of this article to cluster twenty core theories appropriate for the teaching of local democracy. It was found that teaching theories are critical for analysis, synthesis, and comparisons of local democracy-related issues such as the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, community profiling, political representivity, communication strategies, democratic accountability, municipal-community partnerships, and voter empowerment.

The article concludes that theory enables the mastery of a subject and that theoretical underpinnings provide scholars with the tools to interpret phenomena. This also enables the construction and/or modification of existing theories associated with local democracy.

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