

The Uniformity of Broadcast Media in the Muslim World During the Age of Globalization

Peranan Saluran Media di Dunia Islam pada Zaman Globalisasi

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ABSTRACT

Muslim culture is ideally derived from the culture of knowledge and communication. As understood from the notion of ‘ilm (knowledge) and iqra’ (read), the history of communication in Islam has been firmly based on the transmission of al-din (religion) as a comprehensive way of life. Knowledge has been transmitted to the Muslim society through oral communication, written materials as well as printing and broadcast media. However, the development of both printing and broadcast media was attributed directly or indirectly to colonialism or Western dominance. In the colonial and post-colonial Muslim world, the media were said to be slowly incorporated into an international secular culture. Today in the globalized world, the uniformity of broadcast media in the Muslim world is in a need to be re-examined. This paper will evaluate how far the broadcast media in the Muslim world has been constructed based on philosophy and goals that are tied to the concept of al-din. Furthermore, the paper will also discuss the impacts of globalization to the contents of the media. It is argued that globalization has “imposed” some sorts of the new challenges to the Muslim world, especially with regards to the media philosophy, structure and technology.

Keywords: Muslim Community, Broadcast Media, Globalization

ABSTRAK

Kebudayaan Islam telah muncul berdasarkan kepada pengetahuan dan komunikasi. Secara umumnya ‘pengetahuan’ (‘ilm) dan ‘seruan membaca’ (iqra’) dari sudut sejarah adalah tranmisi agama (al-din) dan cara kehidupan Muslim. Perkara tersebut telah dibudayakan melalui komunikasi, penulisan, percetakan dan sebaran media. Walau bagaimanapun perkembangan percetakan dan sebaran media, secara langsung ataupun tidak telah dipelopori oleh dunia Barat. Pada zaman penjajahan Barat di dunia Islam, saluran media telah secara perlahan dipengaruhi oleh kebudayaan sekular antarabangsa. Dalam suasana global sekarang, peranan saluran media di dunia Islam perlu diteliti semula. Artikel ini cuba menilai sejauhmana saluran media di dunia Islam telah dibina berdasarkan falsafah dan matlamat yang berlandaskan al-din dan bagaimana kesan globalisasi mempengaruhi dunia media.

Kata Kunci: Masyarakat Islam, Saluran Media, Globalisasi

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has been defined as the integration of economic, cultural, political, and social systems through internationalization and localization. It is commonly understood as a unitary process inclusive of many sub-processes that are increasingly binding people and the biosphere more tightly into one global system (Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi^c 1993). Like many other eras in human history, “the global age” brings together positive and negative impacts to human life across the globe and, in fact, it has winners and losers. It is generally agreed that we do not have one but many globalizations with a diversity of effects. As far as the process of globalization from the Islamic perspective is concerned, al-‘Alwani (1999) argues that from the very beginning, Islam asserted the equality of all people. Islam emphasizes

the primordial equality and unity of human beings by asserting that all of humanity came from one man and one woman, i.e. Adam and Eve. Therefore, it can be considered as the first cornerstone around which globalism, if advanced, can be based on the Islamic universal ethics and values. Globalism, in contrast to centralization, can be described as the on-going global convergence of values while the later identified as what is the center and what constitutes periphery.

The Muslim world today constitutes 56 countries which are members of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and more than 400 million living as a minority in other countries, and they make up more than 1 billion of the world’s population. Though Muslims themselves believe in the Oneness of God, they are not monolithic as far as their ethnicities and cultural backgrounds are concerned. What unite them is the belief of the concept of *tawhid*, i.e. the unity

of God which denotes submission and total surrender to Him. Though Islam ideally means “peace” and “progress,” in a globalized world today, there is not a single Muslim country is classified as developed. In fact, some are very wealthy being well-endowed with natural resources, but are still lagging behind in modern knowledge, technological skills and effective government. “In a system undergoing centralization, a global power asserts its domination over ‘others’ by locating itself as the normative, political and economic center of the universe,” argued al-^cAlwani (1999). In this current circumstance of centralization, how far the broadcast media in the Muslim world has served the needs of Muslim audiences and shared it with others, developed their own broadcasting philosophy and constructed the objective of “Islamic nations’ identity?” As some scholars asserts that the image of Islam and Muslims is deliberately associated with backwardness, poverty, ignorance and terrorists, especially by the institution of international mass media, a serious thought and consideration should be given to the making of “Islamic contents” in the broadcast media, not only for the Muslims but should be made acceptable also to the world audience at large.

MUSLIM MEDIA SYSTEM AND STRUCTURE

A system can be defined as a boundary-maintaining set of interdependent particles by interdependence. A few decades ago when technologies and media developments were less complex than today, scholars like Siebert et. al and Hachten (cited by Syed Arabi and Rahmah 1989) attempted to categorize media systems into a meaningful groupings such as libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility, the communist systems, the revolutionary system and the development system. Furthermore, attempts were also made to classify media systems based on a regional basis. For example media systems in the Middle East were divided into the mobilization system (Iraq, Libya, Sudan); government system (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates); and a diverse system. However, it was found that the idea of single media system is difficult to be supported though by using variables as a determinant in classifying media systems such as literacy, gross national product, media ownership and forms of control.

The basic question at hand is what kind of media that fits the description of a Muslim media system? In their analysis of Muslim media, Syed

Arabi and Rahmah (1989) define “Muslim media” as mechanical forms both in print and electronic and can be classified into four categories when the relationship between media and political entities are taken into consideration as follows:

1. Muslim media in Muslim countries,
2. Muslim media in non-Muslim countries,
3. Muslim media in non-Muslim countries that cater exclusively for Muslim readers/ audiences, and, Muslim media in non-Muslim countries that cater for Muslim and non- Muslim.

A common denominator used in these classifications is ownership. Muslim media can cater for only the Muslim or for both, Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. For example, a national news agency such as BERNAMA in Malaysia or ANTARA in Indonesia could exemplify a medium for both types of audiences while a magazine published and dedicated on specific issues of Islam caters only Muslims. Meanwhile, in a more constructed definition, Muslim media or Islamic media refers to media that is operated based on the concept of *tawhid* (Unity of God) in its philosophy and follow the rule of *syariah* (God’s rule and law) in its activities. The objectives of the media, its contents and ethics employed, and commitment to Islam may be used to determine the *Islamicity* of Muslim media (Zulkiple Abd. Ghani 2006). In short, Muslim media must follow a system of *al-din*, that is a comprehensive way of life as thought by Islam. The system always emphasizes the submission and obedience to God, teaches a person and society to be righteous, committed to justice, love, freedom, compassion, mercy, honor, dignity and other positive values. Its appeal can be considered as universal and adaptable to every individual and society and in fact, not a new in a human history.

In addition, broadcasting is about both structural and cultural. In a globalized world today the speed of media explosion has increased cultural contacts and caused a massive socio-cultural change in Muslim society. However, as far as the broadcast structure is concerned, it should be noted that most broadcast stations in the Muslim world were established by colonial powers. The philosophy of operating the media, the technologies, economic factors such as advertising represent the complex interaction of forces that characterize the current structural and cultural dominance of broadcast media in the Muslim world today. The established structural, can be revisited such as the case of the development of Sudan’s broadcasting, as Galander (2003) writes that: “The evolution of Sudan’s radio

services is, to a large extent, similar to that of radio and television elsewhere in the Muslim and Arab World. Born under a colonial administration, Sudan's broadcasting services was to serve the main purpose of propagation for the Allied Forces fighting in North and East Africa during the Second World War."

Furthermore, Azzi (2003) describes the historical background of broadcasting in Grand Maghrib (Marrocco, Algeria and Tunisia) as follows: "Broadcasting was introduced into the region during the France rule. Radio broadcasting was established as early as the late 1920s and television appeared in 1954. The purpose of setting up these new technologies was to serve the France communities in the region, particularly those settlers living in or around such cities as Oran, Algiers, Tunis, etc."

Globalization further reinforce the secular culture and system of the broadcast media in the Muslim world and the current position can be best described as a complex blend of the national, regional and global, and to such extent creates the 'uniformity.'

THE UNIFORMITY OF BROADCAST MEDIA IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

In his analysis of the development of media and Muslim culture, Sardar (1993: p. 43) stresses that the tradition of oral communication in the Muslim world was strong in the past. Person-to-person transmission of knowledge was influential. Families were close, friendship circles were wide, public gatherings were frequent and the mosque system was firmly-based. The history of communication in Islam, he said, is the history of Muslim understanding of the notion of *‘ilm* (knowledge) and its actualization in society. As the transmission of *‘ilm* is encouraged by Islam, the Muslim culture is the culture of knowledge and communication. As the development of paper is concerned, it was first introduced in the Muslim world in the mid-eight century and soon after that became an industry, but the Muslim world was late in using available printing technology, and did not do so until the nineteenth century because of a hostile response from some Muslim scholars. One of the reasons why some Muslim scholars opposed to the use of printing was their concern about religious innovation (Robinson 1993: pp. 234-239; Aslam Abdullah 1989: pp. 137-158). Though Islam does emphasis the importance of communication in the essence of

its teaching, the development of modern print media in the Muslim world was attributed to colonialism or Western dominance. In the colonial and post-colonial Muslim world, the media were slowly incorporated into an international secular culture (Aslam Abdullah 1989: 137-158).

The history of the development of broadcasting media in the Muslim world was not much different from that of print media. The dependence on the West for broadcasting technologies, albeit to a different degree, especially for production and distribution, has characterized the "uniformity" of broadcasting media throughout the Muslim world. What is meant by "uniformity" here is the overwhelming imitation and recognition of Western secular thinking in operating the media which is reflected in its content. To a lesser extent, a Muslim country such as Malaysia relies also on programming from Japan, Hong Kong and India, but the contents are, if judged from an Islamic perspective, more or less similar to those produced in the West.

In his study of eighteen Muslim countries in the Middle East, Douglas A. Boyd (1982: 9) argues that "Television in the Arab Middle East has a predominantly western style: television is itself, after all, a western invention that has been moulded by western film and artistic traditions." The influence of Western programs can be traced back to the period when television stations were first established. The situation of dependency exists because these countries, like many developing nations, while enthusiastic about establishing their own television systems, could not successfully solve a basic dilemma facing them. They did not clearly decide how the medium of television would be used nor what kind of programs would be offered to meet the needs of their society, the Muslim *ummah*. As Boyd (1982: 9) further states, in some of these countries, "broadcast officials do not seem to have a philosophy or goals for radio and television that are tied to the goals of the country."

In particular, another study of television in four Arabian Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar – by al-Usmani (1984: 182) demonstrates that the percentage of imported Western programs is higher than local productions even though an effort to produce the latter has been made. The higher percentage can be found particularly in the second channels whose programs are mainly designed for foreign viewers. Table 1 presents the percentages mentioned above:

TABLE 1: Percentage of Total Weekly Transmission Time in First and Second Television Channel of Imported Programs of Four Arabian Gulf States

Countries	First Channel	Second Channel
Kuwait	35%	88.4%
Saudi Arabia	50%	86%
Qatar	64%	78%
Bahrain	75%	92%

According to al-^cUsmani (1984: 198-199) there are four reasons why Western programs are abundant in the Gulf States: The real desire of the television stations to address the foreigners who live in their countries; the high Western standards that cannot compare with those of programs produced in the Arab world; the tough competition from videotape cassettes which has led the Gulf Governments to gamble on the same horse by providing programs similar to those found on videotape; and the lower cost of purchasing Western programs over the production costs of similar shows in the Arab countries.

The desire of these stations to serve foreigners, while neglecting the consequences of the programs for Muslim audiences, has met with criticism from some Muslims as found in many literatures. They question why Muslim youths, in particular, have to be exposed to alien cultural practices such as adultery, nude pictures and consumption of alcohol, when all these are clearly prohibited in Islam. Why should Muslim countries cooperate in promulgating these vices, and are these vices broadcast through Western films and series part of the modernization process? (^cAbd al-Samad 1985: 40-41). The critics then gradually realize that Muslim youths around them, who are listening to radio and watching television, are beginning to dress differently, are whistling Western songs, and abandoning some moral values as the price to pay for “modernization.” In the result, television has been blamed for anything that has gone wrong in society, such as the rising rate of violence and the changing of young peoples’ behavior, though this has not yet been scientifically established. The critics are the people who fear the homogenization of the Muslim world by Western popular culture.

It is dismal to note that Muslims’ “imitative inertia,” to use Davies’s (1989) phrase to describe the continued dependency upon Western scientific thinking and social practices, is linked not only with the importing of Western programs, but also with the fact that many domestically-produced programs are similarly derived from an imported

model. For example, series like “Invitation to Love” and “Mirrors,” produced by an Egyptian company, which deal exclusively with love affairs, according to al-^cUsmani (1984: p. 196), are similar to American soap operas. This is not surprising because virtually all broadcasting stations in the Arab Middle East were purchased from and installed by West European and American equipment manufacturers. Installation agreements called for production training of the buyers by Western experts, or for their training in the country where the equipment was manufactured. In addition, during the initial stage of television’s development, the emphasis was put on construction facilities rather than on programming. The result of all this is a Western-type television program in Arabic (Boyd 1982: 9).

Because a philosophy of the medium to serve the Muslim *ummah* in a way which matches the teachings of Islam is not clearly defined by many Muslim countries, broadcast programs are found to be mainly designed for entertainment, as is evident in the Gulf States. Boyd (1982: 165) further notes,

Gulf television is entertainment oriented. Programmes that are imported from the West or from other Arab countries or those that are taped locally are essentially for entertainment. Some programming of an educational/developmental nature is done for each country’s television system; but music, drama, and other forms of entertainment dominate television. Probably the major reason for this situation is a lack of understanding on the part of programmers about how television might be used for purposes other than entertainment. Officials are often too busy keeping the stations running and coping with technical expansion to plan programming that will meet educational/ developmental goals. This also applies to radio.

A recent region wide study of Arab media has also indicated the need to pay more attention to news and information programming rather than entertainment (www.irex.org). Some may argue that entertainment is neutral, a useful source of psychological diversion from the strains of society, but Islamists believe that it is not simply neutral but value-laden. Therefore, for them, its effect is not considered trivial (Tash 1991: 47-48).

It has become standard practice for broadcasting stations in the Muslim world to begin their daily programs by reading the *Qur’an* and to sign off in the same way, as happens in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia. Apart from that, religious discussions and commentaries are the two most

familiar kinds of Islamic programming to be found in broadcasting schedules. Programs of this kind are added to meet a demand from some quarters of the Muslim population, perhaps to highlight the different character of television and radio in Muslim countries compared with their counterparts elsewhere.

The manner of the introduction of broadcasting in Saudi Arabia in the early 1950s could probably represent this simple type of thinking. To overcome the opposition of religious-minded people to the introduction of radio, King Saud promised to use the media for disseminating religious doctrine (Boyd 1980: 20-21). The result was that one third of the first hour's radio transmission was devoted to readings from the *Qur'an*. The situation when television was introduced was almost the same. For one hour of the first transmission, programs were divided into readings from the *Qur'an*, background music, scenic slides, cartoons and news. However, when programming hours were gradually increased, more materials were required. Lack of experience, knowledge, planning, artistic traditions, and studio facilities – though finance was no object for the Saudis – then forced its officials to find materials from other sources. They turned to the purchase of packages of movies from the United States and Great Britain. The permissiveness of imported programs, as many Muslim perceived, therefore had to be edited, especially unwanted scenes which contained excessive sex and violence. The censorship however was undertaken inconsistently because it was based on personal judgment rather than a clear policy (al-Usmani 1984: 207). Due to the constraints mentioned, the Saudi government's promise to use the broadcasting media "correctly," as demanded by religious-minded people, was unfulfilled. This case may demonstrate the uniform phenomenon facing broadcasting stations in Muslim countries where the reassertiveness of the Islamic ethos has surfaced.

It is noteworthy to mention that radio is more adaptable to local requirements than television because the technology to produce programs is less complicated and cheaper. Nevertheless, radio's two staples – music and news – are also still heavily influenced by foreign material and fashions. American rock music for instance can be heard almost everywhere in Third World countries. Some Muslim countries, such as Bahrain, Dubai, Qatar, and Malaysia operate full-time English services. Most of the program time on these services is devoted to music, specifically British and American popular music (Katz and Wedell 1978: 175-176). Similarly, the music industry in Malaysia for example sticks

closely to the changing fashions of American music. A subtle blend of indigenous and imported music is also noticeable.

Insofar as American music penetrates radio services, it may be because the rhythms of modernization are implicit in it...most important of all, perhaps, is the American music industry's sheer output of records and tapes which is able to keep pace with the ravenous demand for new material by the hundreds of thousands of radio stations of this world (Vatikiotis 1993: 32-33).

As the power of broadcasting media is able to reach a multitude of Muslim audiences, the fear is that to the negative consequences to Muslim general audiences who are continuously exposed to numerous programs which could bring about de-Islamization. This obvious anxiety was expressed, among others by Lois Lamy' al-Faruqi (1986: 172-173) as follows:

They [Muslims] entertain themselves with the products of the Western or Hindu movie and television industries, which are anything but Islamic in content and form. And radios and cassette machines fill the sound waves of their environment with the latest musical expressions of a non-Islamic cultural message... those Muslims [young generations], who will soon join the adult community, have had little strengthening of their identity through an Islamic musical acculturation, since most of the sound arts which they encounter are derived from an alien culture and ideology. This will certainly have serious consequences in the future as the cultural identity of Muslims is threatened with erosion or obliteration.

Lack of a clear philosophy of how the broadcasting media in the Muslim world could properly serve the needs of the Muslim *ummah* has resulted in its being dominated by imported and entertainment programs. The question of how Muslims can preserve their own traditional norms, values and beliefs remain unanswered. Muslim world cannot expect others to help them. As stressed by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamed when he delivered a keynote address at the International Symposium on the Islamic World and Global Cooperation a decade ago, he mentioned that: "The Muslim countries – independent, strong and developed – must take their places as members of the world community of nations. They must remain Muslim of course, and they must uphold Islam. But they must be true Muslim fundamentalists – i.e. they must do what is right and reject what is wrong. The *Qur'an* says in Chapter 111 verse 104, "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that

is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.” Islam has always upheld what is right and just. Islam has never advocated that we should plot or support each other in doing what is wrong. And so if Muslims do what is wrong, other Muslim must condemn it (Ahmad Sarji 1997: 18).”

CONCLUSION

In short, in a globalized world today, broadcasting media throughout the Muslim world have been characterized by uniformity resulting from the massive dependency upon Western structure, system, thoughts and programming, which creates a difficult situation for Muslim countries due to the incompatible secular values. Islam teaches Muslim to uphold God’s Supremacy, preserve the dignity of mankind and work out for the establishment of the well-being of society. Therefore, all broadcasting outputs that attempt to put restrains upon God’s sovereignty have to be avoided. With regard to the emerging and convergence of new media technologies, the demand for global thinking and global reaching for broadcasting organization in Muslim countries is enormously importance. Muslim scholars as well as players in Muslim media must examine in a broader concept for producing a new model for broadcasting media that serves for the ummah.

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