

Islam and Media

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Abstract

The most important roles of the media are agenda-setting and representation. The media, particularly from the West, seems to feature Islam constantly in the negative light. The portrayal of the negative image of Islam takes place by constructing an image of Islam with terrorism, violence, extremism and antipathy to the West. A more recent phenomenon of Western media towards Islam is the fanning of 'Islamophobia' a form of concerted efforts directed to frighten the world of the hostility and enmity imposed by Islam. The Muslim world needs to respond to such striking negative representation of Islam. Contrary to what is generally perceived by the West, Islam in its real essence means 'submission' and 'peace,' a religion that calls for resignation to Allah and promotes and defends peace in the person. As much as the media can disrepute the general Muslim population and Islam, it can also restore and further inform the public of the true image of the religion. Thus, the primary aim of this paper is to explore the utilization of a variety of media to disseminate information and news to Muslims as well as non-Muslims on the true teachings of Islam. Through the media, the proper propagation and understanding of Islam can be enhanced by highlighting the universal values of the teachings of Islam. The media is a very important tool for effective communication and dissemination about Islam which the Muslim world could utilize.

Keywords: media, Islam, Islamophobia, extremism, terrorism, dissemination

1. Introduction

Mass media is a term which connotes the means of a variety of media specifically designed for disseminating news and information to a large audience for a variety of reasons. There is no doubt that mass media wields considerable power, so often referred to as the constructed ability of the media to influence the perceptions of others such as the general public and the people at large over certain news or issues. Mass media, thus, not only affect perceptions but to a certain extent influence foreign policy, processes and outcomes.

As much as the media can disrepute the general Muslim population and Islam, it can also restore and further inform the public of the true image of the religion. Thus, the primary aim of this paper is to explore the utilization of a variety of media to disseminate information and news to Muslims as well as non-Muslims on the true teachings of Islam. Through the media, the proper propagation and understanding of Islam can be enhanced by highlighting the universal values of the teachings of Islam.

2. *Da'wah* and Mass Media

Mass media and communication are considered as the important means of *da'wah* (introducing Islam to others). The work of *da'wah* itself is to communicate the truth of the divine message to people. The communication system differs from one place to another based on the level of people's civilization. In the days of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), for instance, the work of *da'wah* was carried out through verbal communication. Today, we witness the advance of communication system, where there is a sophisticated network of direct communication used for all types of purposes: marketing, information, leisure and education. It is an undeniable fact that these forms of communication may also be regarded as a tool for public opinion maker. Thus, in the midst of this rapid development of technological information, the work of *da'wah* should take advantage of the system and use it fully to disseminate the divine message (Wa'i, 1995).

The various forms of media, for example, the news media, radio and television broadcasts and digital communication such as the internet are indeed important providers of information and news. These forms of media together with books, newspapers, recorded cassettes are equally important means to educate both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. People involve in *da'wah* activities may find these media extremely useful in promoting specific understandings of Islam, in targeting the young, educated audience as well as others. The internet, particularly, can provide users with documentation, news, analysis, issues and images of Islam and all can be conveyed effortlessly and rapidly (Brunt, 2000).

Da'wah can also incorporate aspects of personal and community behaviour, highlighting perhaps the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), thus creating a model that others might seek to emulate. At the micro-level, *da'wah* is still seen as part of the human interaction process, where individual Muslims and organizations seek to propagate Islam.

3. Newspapers and Magazines

Newspapers and magazines are important means to propagate the divine message. All *da'wah* workers can use these media to communicate the divine message to the audience. For *da'wah* to be effective, magazines and newspapers can be produced in different categories such as for children, youths, and adults. In addition, magazines can be planned for the different levels such as the layman, professionals, intellectuals, and scientists. Here, *da'wah* workers need to be trained to present their ideas through creative writing and publication. Different issues can be presented according to the needs based on current and popular topics to meet readers' varying interests. Since the work of *da'wah* is addressed to the public and the writing will reach different people in the society, then, particular attention must be paid to the artistic design, cover, and the content so that it could be done professionally to attract the readers.

The media personnel must play their roles in promoting Islam as a tolerant and accommodating religion as it truly is. In order to do so, those in the media should be trained and exposed to the true teachings of Islam apart from their respective skills in journalism and communication. The media personnel must take extra efforts to ensure fair reports that reflect the true teachings of Islam. They must understand the difference between 'cultural influences' and 'religious influences' and avoid any wrong associations to Islam which will detrimentally redefine the religion. Essentially, it is best to promote a continuous link between media personnel and the Islamic scholars and teachers as this will create a better understanding and provide a better portrayal of Islam as a day-to-day religion (Razak and Abu Bakar, 2002).

Newspapers and magazines are also responsible to expose social issues and events. Those in the media are professionals and are supposed to not only publish newspapers to disseminate the truth, but to serve the community with genuine news. In addition, social issues must be analyzed and reported truthfully. Technical aspects about a certain product, for instance, should be reported to inform the public with the truth about the product. The newspaper should be independent and fair. All issues must be given analysis based on the criteria of the truth to let the people judge by themselves.

By so doing, the newspaper will gain the sympathy of the public. To perpetuate the continuity of the newspaper, it also needs wisdom in presenting the truth. The paper itself need not necessarily be given an Islamic name especially where the authority is not tolerant of religion, particularly Islam; hence the work of *da'wah* will not be effective. If this is the case, then, the name of the paper or magazine should be adjusted with the situation, and the main message of the content maintaining the stance to comply with the concept of the truth.

4. Television, Radio and Internet

As we discuss the importance of mass media communication in regards to the work of *da'wah*, we should also turn our discussion to other modern and current forms of communication, such as television, radio, and the Internet. These are popular forms of communication where message and news transmission would reach a huge and diverse audience. Thus, they would be effective and efficient tools to be used for propagating the divine message. We should take advantage of the benefits offered by the progress of technology and used it for the cause of Islam. It is inevitable that the internet brings a lot of programs and we should not be negative about the presence of the different websites which are against the interest of religious propagation (Al-Thuwayni, n.d). The use of such medium of communication is totally dependent on how to use it. In fact, today there are all sorts of different values being propagated through these popular media. Here, Islam should be ready to offer viable solutions on the problems faced by human beings, taking advantage of the available technology. It is expected that Muslim organizations should establish numerous highly attractive websites to propagate the message, as they are competing with the other websites which have different and perhaps more popular contents. Readers should be

channeled towards the Islamic-related or Islamic-based websites to read about general news and at the same time be informed, directly or indirectly, about Islam.

We return to the question suggested at the outset of the paper; Why do the West holds negative views of Islam and believe that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage aggression and violence? Part of the answer, of course, is ignorance. The West knows very little about Islam and they get very little information about the true and peaceful religion of Islam. The media such as television, radio and internet are surely the popular forms of communication for disseminating the true teachings of Islam (Shehata, 2007). The scope of message should not only cover the essential teachings of Islam and be confined to areas of rites and rituals, but also other areas such as cultural, social, historical, knowledge and sciences, textual and political.

Spreading *da'wah* with the use of these media must be given bigger priority over the use of newspapers and magazines, due to its popularity, entertaining value and its wide audience. Using these communication tools allows us to introduce the divine message in either the formal or informal ways. The formal way suggests that we establish TV and radio stations which are exclusively devoted for the propagation of Islamic. This system is already practiced in certain Muslim countries which established the Qur'an radio broadcasting stations, particularly in the Arab world. Examples would be the radio network of Institute of Islamic Understanding known as *Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* and some other TV stations run by Muslim governments.

Apart from describing the divine message and providing discussions on social issues from an Islamic perspective, radio and TV stations can show other programs such as dramas, films, and documentaries about the expansion of Islam, views of Islam toward modern science, inimitability of the revelation, the relation of Islam with other religions, and so forth. Here, again, *da'wah* workers should have a broad vision that *da'wah* is not necessarily to present Islam in a stoic traditional documentary way; rather they have to be competent to discuss contemporary issues from the Islamic perspective. In view of this, individuals cannot monopolise the work of *da'wah*, as the work of *da'wah* in its overall aspect is a humongous task and should include a big number of manpower in the different fields. In addition, it also needs a big team and a good managerial system. This is because the potential audience of *da'wah* also varies in terms of cultural background and level of understanding. Here, the work of *da'wah* should approach all community members with shows capturing and catering for the variety of cultural, racial, educational, and level of intellectualism.

A *da'wah* organisation should recruit storytellers and professional actors, to present the divine message through the audio-visual medium. In this regards, *da'wah* organizations should collaborate with other scholars to write the scripts, produce the movies, work on cultural presentation, and organize literary events. To attract children and young adults, Muslims should work towards producing cartoons and instilling educational and subtle Islamic elements in them. These things can also be regarded as means of *da'wah* that might be more effective, as people spend more time watching television or surfing the internet.

Broadcasting stations should arrange a variety of program to avoid dullness. It can also broadcast events about conferences and seminars on various issues from an Islamic perspective. Dialogue with different group of religious leaders, and other contemporary issues pertaining to the life of human beings, globalisation, and other political issues can also be organised.

Another approach is to set up general TV and radio stations to present news, events, social issues, and cultural programs under the governance of Islamic normative system. It is not necessary to call it an Islamic program or use Islamic terms as its name, but it should present issues of justice, without bias and prejudice. If the government does not allow the setting up of such private stations, then, *da'wah* workers must create and produce programs that could be broadcasted through the state TV stations. In addition, they may advise them to run programs which comply with the divine message. All advertisements, cultural shows, as well as social entertainment, for instance, should not display erotic programs which may influence the audience, particularly youths. During prayer times, especially before *magrib* (sunset) there must not be any programs for children. It is inevitable that the vast network of information system and explosion of technological advancement are causing anxiety among parents, as it is often difficult to control their children from watching too much television. Here, it is evident that the work of *da'wah* does not necessarily mean that it should deal with Islam per se. Part of *da'wah* includes controlling children and youths so that they would not be trapped in meaningless activities such as spending excessive time in front of the television.

5. Vision of the *Aqidah* (Islamic Tenet)

As the *aqidah* represents a fundamental aspect of Islam, then, it is the duty of *da'wah* workers to prepare reading materials on this particular aspect. Again, the writing should be adjusted to the different levels of education. Most students at the pre university level are mature in their thinking, and because of that the approach should be based on

rational argument in explaining the tenets of *aqidah*. Apart from the reading materials to be taught to school students, they are to be exposed with the rationale of *aqidah*, to liberate all human beings from enslavement of others and to submit to the will of Allah.

Despite that, understanding the concept of the *aqidah* is related to the concept of *shirk* (associating God with other deities through different forms). The issue of *shirk* should be highlighted in light of contemporary issues, and not necessarily the worshipping of idols as happened in early Arabia. The concept of god and *shirk* can be in the form of ideological beliefs which may also contradict the basic teaching of Islam in varying degrees.

Deities can also be in the form of a human being who exposes himself as a despotic ruler and impose others to bow and worship him. False gods can also be in the form of manmade constitutions, which again contradicts the principles of justice and humanity. The issues of god and *shirk* should be highlighted under varying circumstances and beliefs.

Another important aspect of *aqidah* is to introduce the concept of worship with a broader vision and relate it to the social activities in the community. Apart from the formal worship as contained in the five pillar of Islam, worship is to offer total dedication through the social activities to serve the divine rule.

The above description should be given through educational institutions once there are no obstacles from state authority. Whenever there is an objection especially in the state schools, the organization of *da'wah* should initiate their own educational program because the main objective of the work of *da'wah*, which literally means 'calling', is to teach others based on the divine message. The teaching method should be conducted systemically so that the teaching and dissemination of the divine message is given full coverage. The word *tabligh* as mentioned in the Qur'an means to convey the comprehensiveness of the message. Thus, the work of *da'wah* should be done in a comprehensive manner and this can be done with a proper syllabus according to the perceived different stages or levels.

6. *Din* and the *Shari'ah*

Today, misconceptions regarding the divine message abound even for Muslims, who are often ignorant of the religion and regard it as mere rituals to regulate certain events and ceremonies in society. Thus, the scope of religious activities is limited to events such as religious festivals, birth, funerals, and wedding ceremonies. Other human activities in society, management, administration, socio-political issues, according to many, are not within the areas of religion. Such visions need to be either transformed or eliminated. The purpose of the divine message through the arrival of revelation is to guide mankind through the whole social interactions in daily life. The separation of religious activities from the social affairs, it would seem, stems from the impact of secularism.

The Islamic conception of religion incorporates the meaning of "to bind together" and "to re-connect," and yet it also embraces all other aspects which are considered to be outside the domain of religion by some communities, such as worldly matters. The word for "religion" in Islam is *din*, an all-encompassing concept, covering faith, rites and rituals, thought and practices, norms and conduct, the individual and society. The context of *din* also includes matters such as socio-political order, economic system, law and governance, family and social life, education, culture, nature and environment (Kamaruzaman, 2007). The *din* in Islam is inseparable from the *wahy* (revelation). If religion has no revelation, then, it cannot be called religion. Since there are many religious beliefs and each follower claims that his religion is the right one, then, they should be taught how to judge the true religion. In addition, we also need to expose the relation of Islam with other heavenly religions and study the position of non-heavenly religions from an Islamic perspective. This is in line with the Islamic mandate which requires Muslims to respect those of other religions, what better way to do this than by having a thorough understanding of the beliefs and way of life of adherents of other religions.

Islam inspires the individual with faith and teaches the believer to be trustworthy and righteous. Whereas the basic objectives of the *Shari'ah* concerning the individual are the purification of character and moral excellence, the objective is to establish justice in the social sphere. The Islamic conception of justice is not confined to corrective and regulatory alone. It makes justice a part of character and personality of the believer. *Adl*, the Arabic word for justice, literally means "to place things where they belong." It seeks to establish equilibrium through the fulfillment of rights and obligations by eliminating disparities and excesses of wealth and power in life (Kamali, 2007). The central notion of justice in the *Shari'ah* is based on mutual respect for one human being by another. The just society in Islam means the society that secures and maintains respect for persons through various social arrangements that are in the common interests of all members (Doi, 1984).

As the work of *da'wah* is to educate others with the divine message, then, education represents the most vital instrument of *da'wah*. Islam as the divine message has the system of *Shari'ah* with a broad scope that needs to be

exposed to others. It is also worthy to explain the relevance of the *Shari'ah*, which was developed since the days of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, with contemporary global issues.

7. Universal Message

Every individual needs to understand that Islam is a religion with universal message. The impression that revolves in the minds of people that Islam is the religion which is suitable only for Arabs needs to be abolished. Some people might even think that Islam is only the religion of easterners which might not be suitable with the Western and Far Eastern cultures. As people start thinking rationally, they need to be exposed to textual as well as the factual evidence to prove that Islam is universal in the character of its message.

The universal message of Islam is the essential aspect of its core teachings. Islam is a message for all times and generations. Thus, the message of Islam is certainly not limited to a certain time and generation. It is also not limited to a certain place, nation, people or social class. The universality of its message pertains to the comprehensiveness of Islamic teachings. Islam is a message directed to man as a whole, not to his mind, soul, body and heart alone, but all of them together. It contains the essential aspect of humanity in all phases of human life, in every field of endeavor. In fact, it is a message for mankind as a whole (Al-Qaradawi, 1995).

Since Islam is related to the system of the *Shari'ah*, with its law which might have been said to be irrelevant with other cultures, mankind needs to be taught rationally that all Muslims from different parts of the world can govern their life with the use of the *Shari'ah* without facing any problems. The issue of the universal message and the *Shari'ah* does not comply with the idea of nationalism and because of that we need to highlight the position of nationalism from an Islamic perspective. It is also worth to discuss the relation of Islam with the concept of culture and civilization.

When Muslims have the right vision about the divine message, their work, customs, tradition, knowledge and sciences, culture, habits, arts, and technological advances will be in line with the divine norms. Hence, there is a need to address others with regards to the new vision and the position of Islam in the global culture and civilisation.

8. Islamic Jurisprudence

Many Muslims might not get the proper vision of the relation between the *Shari'ah* and *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence). The *Shari'ah* is the whole set of Islamic law, while *fiqh* (lit. knowing in depth) is how to put the *Shari'ah* into practice. That is why the Qur'an mentions the importance of deepening the knowledge of religion, as the verse says,

If a contingent from every expedition remained behind, they could devote themselves to studies in religion, and admonish the people when they return to them, that thus they (may learn) to guard themselves (against evil) (Qur'an, 9: 122).

The *hadith* of the Prophet (pbuh) also mentions the importance of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*),

Whoever wants to attain goodness from Allah he has to deepen the knowledge of his religion (Al-Jawhari, n.d).

In a broader sense, Islamic jurisprudence can be developed based on circumstances. So, after the whole exposition about other issues such as *aqidah* (Islamic tenets), *al-din* (religion), and *Shari'ah*, then, all these things will be operated in daily life under the guidance of *fiqh*. Naturally, Islamic jurisprudence is mainly divided into two main areas, the relationship of humans with God and the relationship with other human beings.

Fiqh which needs to be taught to students deals with the practical system of daily ritual service (*ibadah*) as contained in the five pillars of Islam. They also need to be exposed with the basic understanding of the views of the four schools of thought in Islamic jurisprudence. This would provide essential knowledge on the different views of *fiqh* on certain aspects of *ibadah*.

This teaching of *fiqh* is intended to train students to lead their daily life with the correct observance of the *Shari'ah*, as the practice of ritual services without proper knowledge become fruitless in the sight of God.

9. Legislation of the *Shari'ah*

The word *Shari'ah* means a way or method (*minhaj*). It refers to the whole set of Islamic law and for one to go towards to God through its application. Each heavenly religion has its own *Shari'ah*, which differs from one to another. Islam is a monotheistic religion given to all prophets. The purpose of the divine message is to let human beings dedicate their life to the will of God. The message cannot be put into practice except through a set of rules contained in the *Shari'ah*. As human beings live in different places and situations, the *Shari'ah* is modified

accordingly based on God's wisdom. The concept of the *Shari'ah* is mentioned, among other things, in these verses,

To you We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the Scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that has come to you. To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues (Qur'an, 5: 48).

Throughout history, all Prophets were required to legislate the *Shari'ah* as the way of establishing the religion, as the verse says,

The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah - that which We have sent by inspiration to you - and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: namely, that you should remain steadfast in Religion, and make no divisions therein: to those who worship other things than Allah, hard is the (way) to which thou callest them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him) (Qur'an, 42: 13).

Each religion has its own norms. Those who subscribe to non-heavenly religions also make it rule which God prohibits due to the contradiction with human nature. The warning is given not to let them to follow man-made norms as the verse says,

What! Have they partners (in godhead), who have established for them some religion without the permission of Allah? Had it not been for the Decree of Judgment, the matter would have been decided between them (at once). But verily the wrongdoers will have a grievous Penalty (Qur'an: 42: 21).

Similar prohibitions are also given to those who sought human desires in the community, as the verse says,

Then We put you on the (right) Way of Religion: so follow you that (Way), and follow not the desires of those who know not (Qur'an, 45: 18).

The fruit of *da'wah* should lead to the legislation of the *Shari'ah*. Its establishment cannot be achieved unless individual Muslims have full consciousness in observing all the rules contained in the revelation. Then the work of *da'wah* should be addressed to all levels in the community. Once Muslims are aware of their own *Shari'ah*, the next step is to approach the authority with the use of wisdom to apply the Islamic law as the source of justice. After the downfall of Islamic civilization throughout the collapse of the caliphate system, Muslim leaders made endless efforts to revive the *ummah* through the work of *da'wah*. They appealed to form organizational and political platforms to unite Muslims in response to the process of the degeneration in the Muslim world (Muhammad, 1984).

In the context of *da'wah*, all Muslim organizations should work jointly to urge Muslim rulers to observe the *Shari'ah* in governing people. At present, the responsibility of the *ummah* is inseparable from the work of *da'wah*. To approach the upper class and intellectuals, *da'wah* should be conducted with the use of discussion to let them compare between the divine message and man-made legislation and to reveal the uniqueness of the *Shari'ah*. The goodness of the divine message cannot be established unless its principles are structured through legislation. In view of this, it is relevant to refer to the warning given by Ali b. Abi Talib that says,

The Truth, which is disorganized, will be defeated by the falseness that is well structured (Husain, 2004).

The concept of the *Shari'ah* is to bring them out of the darkness into the light, from the servitude of mankind to be the slave of God, coming out from the narrowness of worldly life into the grandeur of Islam and from the tyrannical victims of human worldview into the justice of Islam (Nadvi, 1982).

The application of the *Shari'ah* cannot be imposed through partial efforts. Individual awareness on the practice of the required obligations as stated in both the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, and in the long run, could lead to the establishment of an Islamic order. This is the main difference between man-made constitution and the Islamic value system (Nadvi, 1982).

Through the above program, it is expected through the work of *da'wah* to achieve the goal which, in the end, will lead to the emergence of great civilization, history, strength, and integrative unity of the *ummah* to become the best of nation ever brought to humanity that complies with the verse,

You are the best of the *ummah* that was brought to the whole of humanity (Qur'an, 3: 110).

10. Conclusion

While it is a common feature for the Western media to harbour prejudicial feelings against Islam, the media in the Muslim nations, on the other hand, need to show greater commitment when it comes to reporting about Islam and Muslim affairs. Media personnel specialising in the reporting of Islam and Muslim affairs need to be exposed to a certain acceptable level of knowledge in Islam in order to have a better grasp of Islamic values and issues which would be reflected in their work. Every effort in training and educating the media personnel must be done with the genuine intention to enhance their proper understanding of Islam with the view to a fair and just reporting.

At the government level, Muslim nations need to send diplomatic missions to non-Muslim media by establishing contacts and links to enhance the image of Islam. At the non-government level, Islamic organisations and movements should also make greater efforts to reach global media networks so that a better understanding of Islam may be portrayed, particularly, on the need to ensure correct and fair reporting.

The media is a powerful and indeed very influential and can be used to help differentiate between Islam and terrorism. In fact, violence against innocent people violates Islam. The media must be able to show these differences and at the same time portray the image of Islam according to the true tenets of Islamic teachings.

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