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ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE ISLAMIZATION PROCESS

The Muslim world is an entity, more in the ideational realm than in a physical sense. While the Muslim world as a whole is in a transitional stage, in terms of modernity, the various Muslim countries are not characterized by a uniform measure of modernization. Rather, they are in various stages of transition. To make matters more complex, almost none of the Muslim countries is either uniformly or adequately developed in all the demographic and socioeconomic indices of modernization. Rather, each one of them is characterized by wide disparities between one sector and another.

More specifically, urbanization and literacy figures are somewhat encouraging in absolute terms, but not in terms of their significance for mass media production and consumption since the state of the mass media, except for the radio, is a function of urbanization in the Third World, and since, generally speaking, urbanization in most Muslim countries is within the range of the "critical minimum" in the Lerner model, the newspapers, films, and especially television, do not claim an audience adequate enough to support them economically. Nor are functional literacy and higher scientific education, which enable people to develop skills and master technology, are above the critical minimum range. Although about 48 per cent of the (independent) Muslim countries (but claiming only about one-third of the total population of the Muslim countries) has a per capita income of over $300, none of the Muslim countries is technologically advanced and industrially developed to a reasonably adequate degree.

More distressing is the Muslim world's profile on the political participation and media consumption indices. The high incidence of military governments and of the absence of written constitutions indicate a certain lack of political development and institutionalization. This has far reaching consequences in terms of media effectiveness. For one thing, it means certain restrictions on how the media operates, what the media projects and on how it is used. For another, in the

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light of the Third World experience, lack of political consensus means a lack of wider and voluntary acceptance of the rulers. Situations as these bred alienation and a credibility gap between the rulers and the ruled. Inevitably, this lack of credibility comes to be extended to the media since they are for the most part state-controlled, and are used to sell the regime. Thus, their messages become suspect in public eyes, thereby adversely affecting their effectiveness in socializing people into certain values and behaviour, without reference to their intrinsic merits and demerits.

On the other hand, no Muslim country, can claim to make the grade in all the four media—newspapers, radio, television, and films—in terms of the Unesco minimum of media consumption—that is, ten newspapers, five radio acts, five television sets and two cinema seats per 100 persons.

Of all the media, radio is fairly developed, followed by television. But the latter, if only because of its added advantages of a visual dimension, claims an edge over the rest of the mass media in terms of both impact and effectiveness, Its pervasiveness is, however, restricted to urban centres and their neighbourhood since television in the Muslim world, as in the rest of the Third World, is wholly an urban affair in terms of its accessibility, span, and content. Hence, its appeal for the present is for the most part confined to urban centres and their neighbourhood.

Despite its vast potential for socialization purposes, television is a neutral agent. It is neither wholly "the opiate" nor "the teacher" of the masses *per se*. The predominance of either of these roles at any given moment depends upon the use to which it is put by television operators and programme producers. Above all, television is meant for entertainment. It is considered a capital means of entertainment, and is used by the television audiences across the globe (including those in the socialist countries) for entertainment, rest and relaxation.

Children are especially attracted to television primarily because it fulfils some of the child's basic and more crying needs. More important, television programmes make a much deeper and a more lasting impact on the child's mind than any of the other media programmes and contents (such as radio serials, comic books, and the like). Yet another important characteristic of television is that while entertaining, it also tends to provide viewers with incidental learning. And it is here that television could be imaginatively used as a socializing agent.

Television programmes are generally produced within a certain social milieu, and a certain ideological framework. However, some programmes such as news, films, documentaries, current affairs and childern's programmes lend themselves to be manipulated rather easily for projecting ideological themes. Hence the extreme caution taken in both the Western and socialist countries against lending their respective television networks to indiscriminate showing of each other's programmes.

For the present, the Muslim countries cannot possibly avoid importing programmes from abroad because (i) they generally lack the industrial and technological base to produce programmes on an extensive scale; (ii) at least one-half of the Muslim countries (but with over two-thirds of the total population) lack a developed economy to finance and support large scale programme production; (iii) they lack a common linguistic framework; and (iv) they also lack professional men, both in terms of absolute numbers and the requisite skills and expertise, to produce programmes of a wide variety, as also artists in sufficient strength and with the requisite professional experience to play role called for in the production of programmes of such a wide variety.

There are, however, two ways in which the major producers and distributors of television programmes in the international market could be made to become interested in Islamic themes. On the negative side, the major Muslim countries importing Western-produced programmes on a large scale could, through a concerted effort, exercise a good deal of influence (and pressure, if need be) on the Western programme exporters into producing programmes that are of specifically Muslim interest—programmes depicting themes from or based on Muslim history, the cultural heritage of Islam, and current Muslim problems. On the positive side, the Muslim countries may organize comprehensive international programmes encompassing seminars, exhibitions, etc. on the lines of the "Festival of Islam" organised in London in 1976. These programmes may be organized in the capitals or intellectual centres of the (Western) developed countries, more specifically in the former colonial countries which were in contact with the Muslim countries in the past. The experience with the holding of the "Festival of Islam" shows that the organization of such programmes is bound to encourage these countries to take a more enlightened interest in the history, cultural heritage and achievements of Islam on the one hand, and the current Muslim problems on the other. This would also, inter a ia, encourage television programme producers in these countries to evince gre ter interest in Islamic themes.

Even so, the ideal solution would be for the Muslim countries to pool their resources together and produce television programmes on a cooperative basis. The programmes may be originally produced in Arabic, English and French, which languages are most commonly understood by the elites in the various Muslim countries, and may later be dubbed into their national languages.

An advisory body may be constituted to draw up a plan to select themes for the programmes on an inter-regional basis. This committee may serve as a "gate-keeper", and supervise their content at the source itself.

As to the themes and contents of the programmes, some broad suggestions may be offered. A primary consideration in the choice of the programmes should be that they must be informed by the attribute of the commonality of interest for most, if not all, of the Muslim countries. That is, the focus should be on those historical events, developments and characteristics that bind the Muslim people together and emphasize their common heritage and legacy rather than those which promote dissension and disunity and portray their past differences and present feuds. Within this framework, the following tentative themes may be suggested:

   (i) Epics and adventure stories (dramas) from early Islamic history. The exploits of Muslim heroes like Khalid bin Walid, Tariq bin Ziyyad, Salahuddin Ayubi and Mohammad the Conqueror (of Constantinople) would conveniently lend themselves to producing adventure programmes that could be expected to interest and enthrall audiences, especially children, equally across the Muslim world.

  (ii) Fables from Islamic lore and tradition, depicting Islamic values, highlighting its value-system and delineating Islamic sensibility on the lines of the Sunday School stories. This would be of special interest to children.

 (iii) Leaders of reform movements in various Muslim countries such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the Sanussi, the Mahdi (of the Sudan), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Abduh, Syed Ahmad Khan, Imam Khaksi, Musa Sadra and Syed Tabatabai. Documentaries may be produced on their life, work and achievements.

 (iv) Heroes of the freedom movements in various Muslim countries during the past two centuries—such as Emir Abd el-Qadir of Algeria, Imam Shamyl of Daghestan (Central Asia), 'Urabi

Pasha of Egypt, Enver Pasha, and Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, Muhammad Ben Abdel-Karim el-Khattabi of the Riffs, El-Haj Emin al-Hussaini of Palestine. Tipu Sultan of India, King Faisal of Iraq, Mohammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan, and Ahmad Soekarno of Indonesia. Dramas may be produced on their life and work, and their role in the liberation of their respective countries.

(v) Ancillary to (iv), documentaries and feature programmes may be produced on the liberation movements in various Muslim countries and the ongoing movements such as those in Palestine and Eritria, with special emphasis on the common factors informing and characterizing these movements. These may also include documentaries on the ongoing struggle of Muslim minorities in various countries to win for themselves an honourable existence, such as those in the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, India and Yugoslavia.

(vi) Documentaries on the achievements of Muslims in various branches of knowledge during the mediaeval times.

(vii) Documentaries on life and culture in various Muslim countries.

(viii) Documentaries on political problems confronting the various Muslim countries. These may be presented in the context of world Muslim problems and in an analytical framework, bringing out the similarities and dissimilarities between them.

(ix) Documentaries on outstanding Muslim personalities in the modern period such as King Fasial of Saudi Arabia, and Ayatullah Khomeini of Iran.

The above represents but a tentative list of potential themes which would command ready-made audiences in the Muslim world. Such programmes would enable the viewers to gain a better acquaintance of other Muslim geoples, their past struggles and present problems, as also to sympathize with them. This, in turn, would lead towards a better international Islamic undertanding.

It has been noted that in watching television, one is learning all the time, although he may not be conscious of it and although learning may be beyond or outside the main purpose of the particular television programme he is watching. This is what is called incidental learning. And, however much one may try, one cannot possibly get away from this sort of learning. Recent researches have established that this kind of learning is quite considerable.[1] Also, that by an imaginative approach and judicious planning, the content of incidental learning in television programmes could be considerably increased.

The remarkable thirst for knowledge found in a Senegalese survey on television shows that the information content in television programmes could be conveniently increased without unduly annoying or alarming the audience in the developing countries.[2] Another survey has shown that "the women of Dakar, like popular audiences elsewhere in the developing world, have a thirst for knowledge and education which makes them impatient with mere distraction", and resent "entertainment for the sake of entertainment".[3] Here, then is a situation which could be capitalized upon to socialize viewers into Islamic values.

But the socialization process has its own problems, requirements, and compulsions. Today we live in a small world, with the communication channels between countries and nations wide open. One result of this is that we are receiving messages from the environment all the time, which could by no means be avoided. The Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Czechoslovak revolt of 1968 have demonstrably shown that state-controlled media beaming and repeating a single message cannot be effective all the time in the present world. Socialization and social mobilization could, of course, affect attitudes, behaviour and values—but only to a point. Even so, to be effective to that critical point calls for plugging in the discontinuities in the socialization process. Studies have shown that the mass media cannot change firmly held beliefs. It can, however, slightly redirect them,[4] seeking to bring about a gradual change over time. Besides, beaming a message through a single channel is not considered credible.[5] To make it acceptable and effective, it must be reinforced through other channels. Hence, what the television could do at the most is to supplement what is generally presented in books, newspapers and films and on the radio, the pulpit and the platform. That is, it could perform this role provided the Muslims overcome their traditional animus against the visual arts and the performing arts, which has over the decades led the Muslims to accept or tolerate (as the case may be) the medium of cinematographic arts with somewhat serious reservations. Or, at least, the issue is resolved to the religious and cultural satisfaction of the Muslims.

The discussion above shows that television cofuld be effective for socialization purposes when and only when two major conditions are met. First, audience must be made to become psychologically prepared to accept the medium for what it is, and to receive messages mediated through it. Second, and rqually important, the value-system that is sought to be promoted and propagated through television programmes must first find concrete and institutional expression in the society. The

latter prerequisite, in turn, calls for Islamicizing our thinking and life-patterns before we embark upon utilizing the mass media (including television) for the socialization of viewers, especially children, into Islamic values.

NOTES

1. Wilbur Schramm, *Television Reconsidered*, Occasional Paper I (Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, 1972), pp. 14-15.

2. See Pierre Fouseyrollas, *Television and the Social Education of Women*, (Paris: Unesco, 1967), p. 34.

3. *Mass Media in an African Context* : *An Evaluation of Senegal's Pilot Project*, Unesco Report and Papers on Mass Communication No. 69 (Paris : Unesco, 1974) p. 22.

4. Wilbur Schramm, "Uses of Communication in Developing Countries", *East-West Centre News* (Honolulu), IV: 5 (October-November, 1964).

5. Y. V. L. Rao, *Communication and Development : A Study of Two Indian Villages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963).