

## Islamic Values and Ethics in Communication

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### ABSTRAK

*Makalah ini membincangkan mengenai implementasi nilai dan etika Islam dalam bidang komunikasi secara umum dan kewartawanan secara khusus. Islam sebagai agama yang mengutamakan komunikasi melihat etika dan nilai-nilai mulia sebagai prinsip utama dalam interaksi manusia. Justeru itu, rujukan konsep-konsep utama komunikasi Islam, tabie nilai dan etika Islam serta sebahagian sifat akhlak mahmudah dan mazmumah yang boleh dilaksanakan dalam komunikasi dibincangkan dalam kertas ini. Dalam makalah ini juga dihujahkan bahawa Islam menyediakan nilai dan etika yang bersifat universal dalam merancang fungsi komunikasi dan menentukan produk akhirnya dengan objektif utama untuk memelihara kemuliaan insan.*

### ABSTRACT

*This article seeks to examine the implementation of Islamic values and ethics in communication in general and journalism in particular. Islam, as a communicative religion, regards ethics and positive values as the core principles for human interaction. The conceptual referents of Islamic communication, the nature of Islamic values and ethics, some praiseworthy and blameworthy character-traits which are applicable to communication fields and suit with universal values of human nature, are then discussed. This paper argues that Islam provides universal values and ethics in designating communication functions and verifying its end products with the main objective of enhancing the dignity of mankind.*

### INTRODUCTION

When Muslim journalists gathered at the First International Conference of Muslim Journalists held in Jakarta in 1981, they endorsed a covenant constituting two main points: 1) all Muslim journalists and media people should follow Islamic rules of conduct in their journalistic endeavours, and 2) Muslim media should work towards achieving integration of the Muslim individual's personality. Though efforts have been made to integrate the teaching of Islamic ethics into the practice of communication in general and journalism in particular, Muslim

communicators themselves, in practice, have been very much influenced by Western orientation. This is attributed, among other things, to the Western curricula in communication thoughts in many institutions of higher learning in Muslim countries. Therefore, as stressed by Siddiqi (2000: 50), Islamic values and ethical principles should be the main obligation of Muslim media as well. In fact, Aslam Abdullah (1988) discovered that no systematic study has been undertaken to identify and classify the Muslim media. He differentiates between 'Muslim world media' and 'Muslim media'. The former portrays Muslims, but is produced from secular viewpoints, whereas the latter portrays Muslims in particular and the world in general from an Islamic perspective.

Therefore Islamic ethics and values in communication should be viewed through the original sources of Islam, i.e. the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. This paper will discuss the conceptual referents of Islamic communication and outline some characters concerning virtues which are applicable to communication and suit with universal values of human nature, and on vices which should be removed or avoided, in order to enhance the dignity of mankind.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL REFERENTS

Muhammad Kamal al-Dīn ʿAlī Yusuf (1984: 2120) defines Islamic communication as "the act of transmitting *maʿlumat* [information, ideas and attitudes] which are true and accurate according to Islam". This definition demonstrates that communication in Islam is a primal function and, in contemporary civilization, a necessity for the survival of truly Islamic teachings. As Islam is a communicative religion, the Quran being the last Scripture of God and the supreme device of Islamic communication, needs to be proclaimed to all people until the end of time. This requirement applies also to the traditions of the Prophet and other Islamic *maʿlumat*. The act of communicating Islam has been promised by God as an *ahsan* (better) reward. "Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to God, work righteousness, and says, 'I am of those who bow in Islam?' (Fussilat: 33).

According to Ibrahim Abu Nab (1984), the conceptual referents of Islamic communication lie in the ways in which the nature of human beings is regarded by Islam, that is through the rich Islamic triangular relationship between God, man and society. As with any other sphere of life, Muslims believe that the doctrine of *tawhid* (the unity of God) is a fundamental guidance for all levels of operating Islamic communication. The Islamic world view of human beings is that man is created to serve God. Man is born with trust (*amanah*) and becomes God's vicegerent (*khalifah*) on the earth. In order to perform this function, God has equipped him with powers of hearing, seeing, and cognition as well as the ability to distinguish truth from error. As a vicegerent, guardian and custodian

of the planet, man is made accountable for everything he does because of the free will he possesses. Under the *tawhidic* view, Islamic communication is regarded as a “road” to God (Ibrahim Abu Nab 1984).

Muslims believe that man’s communication is not only horizontally with his fellow beings, but also vertically with God. “I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he crieth unto Me” (al-Baqarah: 186), says God. Man’s innate form of communication with God is to fulfil the purpose of his creation and existence. This relationship between God and man is unique and can be achieved through performing the prayer, the fundamental obligation of Islam, and other religious duties which are recognised by Islam. Therefore, this mutual communication is considered as the instrument of elevation. The result of such a relationship is a God-fearing attitude which could characterise the nature of communication outputs.

As far as the development of new media is concerned, some Muslim scholars argued that it should be directed towards the achievement of both physical and spiritual development. The technology is encouraged in Islam as a means to manage the earth according to the will and purpose of God. Herein lies the sacred trust that has been accepted by man to manage and maintain nature as God’s representative on earth (Tengku Mohd. Azman 1992). In addition, under the principle of *tawhid*, it would be argued that all communication outputs that attempt to put restraints upon God’s sovereignty are considered to be void. The contents must not tend in the direction of creating and perpetuating political, social, economic, and cultural idols; nor are they allowed to promote the cult of personality (Hamid Mowlana 1989). All works leading toward the achievement of this objective are considered to be a worship (*‘ibadah*), provided that the works are performed with sincere intention to serve God.

Besides the relationship between God and man, society – to which the injunctions and invocations of the Quran are directed – is conceived in Islam as being mass, participatory, heterogenous and diverse. “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other” (al-Hujurat: 13). Different tribes, colours, and tongues are acceptable as well as religious variations and differences, though Islam propagates itself as the only religion for worship. Establishing a social order based on the ethical standpoints of Islam for which justice and equity are the ultimate purposes, is among the objectives of Islamic communication (Olayiwola 1994: 21). Striving to achieve such objectives is regarded as the ultimate goal of Islam in space-time. It also has been argued that the foremost aim of Islamic communication is to attain a balance between spiritual achievement and the material development of society,

This is to say that in their daily development and uses of technology they would avoid the excesses of a materialist culture where technology is perceived as a means of accumulating material things simply because of the pleasure or greed involved in doing so. In societies where the human beings recognise their *khalifah* [vicegerency] and live up to

the demands and obligations of *‘ibadah* [worship], technological change would be shaped by fear of the Creator and by the strong desire to improve the quality of life (Nyang 1988: 57).

In short, the conceptual referents of Islamic communication lie in the whole body of Islam. Therefore, it is impossible to deal with each premise in isolation. An awareness of the nature of the relationship between God, man and society could be a guiding principle for all stages of Islamic communication practices. What makes the difference between Islamic communication and existing communication theories is the unequivocal emphasis placed by Islam on the morality and dignity of mankind. Mohd. Yusof Hussain (1986), professor of communication at International Islamic University Malaysia, for example, has stressed the importance of these values as follows, "...morality, the virtues of justice and equity, of altruism and brotherhood, of honesty and truthfulness, of uprightness and cooperation must be upheld" Ethics therefore becomes a core principle in designating communication functions, and verifying the end products under the religious doctrine of "enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil" All designated communication outputs, in whatever forms and formats, should be directed to provide the well-being of society and not the reverse.

#### ISLAMIC ETHICS AND VALUES

Islam is a complete way of life and its teachings cater for all fields of human existence. Based on the teachings of the Quran, Muslim believes that Islam does not mean 'religion' as commonly understood in the West. Its teachings encompass more than matters of faith, ritual and dogma. Islam provides rules for a philosophy of life, an economic principle, a social order, a rule of government, and more importantly, a moral principle to guide human beings to achieve peace, prosperity, equality and brotherhood in this world and in the hereafter.

Ethics is regarded in Islam as the qualities of the soul which man should achieve, so that he may be good and virtuous in his character-traits. Man is said to have a supreme end, i.e. happiness in the hereafter, so acts are considered as good if they produce such an effect on the soul as would lead to that end, and bad if they prevent the soul from attaining it. Muslims thinkers divide characters of man into two categories: 1) blameworthy character-traits (*akhlak al-madhmumah*) which acts related to it are considered as vices, and 2) praiseworthy character-traits (*akhlak mahmudah*) which are regarded as virtues (see for example Muhammad Abul Quasem 1975 and George F. Hourani 1985). The former such as falsehood, fabrication, duplicity, hypocrisy, mendacity, deceit, treachery, pride, arrogance, envy, hatred, lust, suspicious, excess in sexual desire, delusion, etc. are regarded as 'diseases of the soul' These vices can draw away man from the near presence of God. While the latter such as truthfulness, veracity, sincerity, honesty, uprightness, righteousness, justice, compassion, kindness, forgiveness,

gratefulness, humility, trust, gratitude, patience, etc. are related to the purified soul and the highest of their qualities can be acquired by man through self-training for the purpose of attaining proximity to God.

Some of the above-mentioned characters which are considered as universal and applicable in all situation and societies will be discussed below.

#### PRAISEWORTHY CHARACTERS

Reporting the truth is perhaps the most serious credo for the writer, the journalist or the media practitioner. In order to report the truth, one will have to know it, to respect to it, and more importantly, to believe in it. Muslims are always required to uphold the truth and to care about it as it is part of the fabric of Islam itself as the Quran stresses, "They [Muslims] are the steadfast, truthful, obedient, charitable, and they pray for forgiveness at dawn" (Āl 'Imran: 17).

Some may argue that media practitioners or journalists in particular agree that they should try to report facts objectively and accurately and to conduct themselves ethically as declared in the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi in the United States. The Code pronounces that "journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know the truth ... truth is our ultimate goal" Likewise, Asahi Shimbun, Japan's leading newspaper states its credo "to report the truth fairly and promptly; to keep editorial comment liberal and impartial" (Mansor Ahmad Saman 1989). Though the principle of practicing the truth is positively mentioned, many critics argue that many obstacles have to be faced by journalists like the organised of "market-oriented" media and the tight pressure of working deadlines. These usually do not go very well with reporting the truth. This has been observed by Said (1981), for example, whose analysis below provides an illuminating insight of how the image of Islam is distorted by Western journalists and the truth becomes lies, half-truth and misconceptions:

Not knowing the language is only part of a much greater ignorance, for often enough the reporter is sent to a strange country with no preparation or experience, just because he or she is canny at picking up things quickly or happens already to be in the general vicinity of where front-page news is happening (Said 1981. 11).

Ironically, Said constantly argues that "for the first time in history [since Iranian hostage crisis] ... the Islamic world may be said to be learning about *itself* by means of images, histories, and information manufactured in the West" (Said 1981: 52). Similarly, Mughees-uddin (1997) stresses that:

Sometimes media also suppresses and mocks the truth. The media coverage of the Rushdie affair, ABC's segment on the Syariah in Pakistan and Islamic revolution in Iran and Sudan are but a few cases in point.

Siddiqi (1991: 493) too has commented on the contemporary practices of the media that:

Trying to capture an ever-larger share of advertising dollars, networks resort to deceit and shameless displays of suggestive sexual behaviour. Islam sees this as a societal disbelief in God and the Day of Judgement and equates such behaviour with the self-deceit which God has increased to punish their perpetrators.... Such disbelief leads people to rush towards dazzling temptations without abiding by the rules of proper conduct, for they are devoid of spiritual health and are preoccupied with physical pleasures.

Truthfulness, according to Islam's great philosopher, al-Ghazali, has a wider connotation as it must present in speech, in intention, in resolution, in the fulfilment of resolution, in action and in all the stations on the path. He relates truthfulness with intention and sincerity – the three virtues for him are inseparable because intention is a basic requirement of devotional acts; intention without sincerity will produce harmful to the soul; and sincerity without truthfulness is obviously in vain. He maintains that good intention will create an inclination to God and a firm determination for good deeds. Furthermore, sincerity in any acts will produce a single motive that is to attain nothing but nearness to God in order to enjoy the delights of paradise or to escape the punishment of hell in the hereafter. Acquisition of these three virtues in their perfect degree is not easy, but it requires a constant control over of the carnal soul and a continuous process of soul purification (Muhammad Abul Quasem 1975).

In Muslim cultural theory, praiseworthy characters have a root in divine revelation. Muslims are always reminded to be forever mindful of The Almighty Allah and are constantly urged to remind one another of the truth. Other good deeds such as justice, patience, moderation, trust, love etc. can be inculcated on every individual based on the principle of habit formation. These positive values can be formed by repetitive actions. Though one will find difficult to behave in the required manner for the first time, he or she will find it easier for the second time and much easier for the subsequent occasions. Amongst the highest degree of such praiseworthy characters in Islam is known as *ithar*, i.e. preferring others above one's own self. The application of this positive value has consequences which may affect and create new paradigm for media practitioners as well as society in general. Olayiwola (1994: 31) emphasises on this character:

For Muslims, the nature of their commitment to Allah and their responsibilities toward their mission as well as towards fellow human being, demands that they should be ready to offer sacrifices in term of their time, wealth and other possessions. A true understanding of the *sender, message, channel, receiver* and *effect* of communication in Islam makes it quite clear that preferring others above one self facilitates interpersonal relationships as well as interpersonal communication.

#### BLAMEWORTHY CHARACTERS

It is well known that moral decadence portrayed through the media (particularly television) is a sphere strongly attacked by Islamists. A variety of metaphors such as disease, evil, and Satan's instruments are used to describe the media

and its effects. Mass media – newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, films, internet – have been accused of bringing about a moral decline particularly among Muslim teenagers. Ironically, according to Siddiqi, in an era of rapidly developing technology coupled with an increasingly technically conversant media consumer, the traditional codes of media ethics are becoming a thing of the distant past (Siddiqi 2000). At this juncture, it is fair to acknowledge that Muslims are dutiful to help one another in righteousness and piety and are forbidden to help one another that may lead them to do evil deeds.

Islam regards blameworthy characters such as falsehood, lying, slander, backbiting, hatred, suspicious etc. as vices because these acts cause harm and pain to one's fellow-men as well as oneself in various ways. Slander for example defines as "disclosing any matter whose disclosure is disliked by the person to whom it is disclosed, or by any other person; it is all the same whether the disclosure is verbal or in writing or by indication, or whether what is disclosed is speech or action, or whether it is an imperfection or not; if it is an imperfection, disclosing it is slandering and backbiting at once" (Muhammad Abul Quasem 1975), can destroy one's reputation unjustly. Therefore, the act of disclosing any secret whose disclosure is disliked is considered as a sin. Muslims are reminded by the Quran to observe this ethic as follows:

O you who believe, no people shall mock other people, for they may be better than thy, no shall women mock other women, for they may be better than thy. Do not defame each other, nor ridicule any names. It is repugnant to practice wickedness after acquiring faith. Those who refuse to repent are wicked (al-Hujurat: 11).

O you who believe, you shall avoid suspicions; even a little suspicion is sinful. You shall not spy, nor shall you backbite each other. Does any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You certainly abhor this. You shall observe God, for God is Redeemer, Merciful (al-Hujurat: 12).

These kinds of blameworthy characters are the by-products of hypocrisy in the soul. The soul (insight spiritual) is the core of man. Through the extensive self-training, one can attain the highest qualities of the soul, i.e. the nearness to God, and get rid blameworthy characters. Therefore, as far as communication in Islam is concerned, the emphasis is always to serve the public interest based on the moral principles. For example, in developing the model of Islamic broadcasting, Davies (1989: 177) emphasises that:

The consequence of the Islamic frame of reference for broadcasting is the existence of a unitary moral and ethical code for all levels of the process, from setting the terms of regulatory legislation to the day-to-day decision-making of programme production.

## CONCLUSION

Islam regards ethics and positive values as the core principles of human communication. The conceptual referents of Islamic communication are based on the acknowledgement of God's Supremacy, establishment of the well-being of society, and enhancement of the dignity of mankind. Ethics and values that are universal in nature are acceptable to all religions and societies. Praiseworthy characters must be inculcated in all fields of communication while blameworthy characters must be dispelled in order to enhance human dignity. This may provide an answer to the question of why there are codes without conduct, technology without humanity, theory without reality (practice), global change without personal change, and personal ethics without world awareness.

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