

BEYOND WESTERN- ORIENTED COMMUNICATION THEORIES

A NORMATIVE ARAB- ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

For many decades, communication as a theoretical field of study has been dominated by Western-oriented perspectives that arose in the context of media perceptions in Western Europe and North America. Western communication theories have been promoted around the world as possessing a strong element of universalism. In recent years, this approach has been challenged on the basis of obfuscating the cultural peculiarities of non-Western societies as significant components of communication theorisation. In this article, the author presents a normative Arab-Islamic perspective as a basis for future communication theory building in the Arab-Islamic context. Drawing on the notion of "Worldview," the Arab-Islamic perspective identifies four antithetical conceptual constructs that bear on the nature of communication: individualism-conformity, transcendentalism-existentialism, intuitive-rational processes, and egalitarianism-hierarchy. The author concludes that Arab-Islamic communication patterns are formalistic, indirect, hyperbolic, asymmetrical, metaphysical and orally biased.

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During the past fifty years, communication as a field of theoretical investigation has generated a wide range of perspectives around the world. This evolving nature of communication seems to be induced, more than anything else, by its intrinsic propensity to accommodate new ideas and orientations on a cross-cultural scale. Yet, generally the experience over the past few decades has shown that this field remains highly captive to Western (especially American) conceptual and methodological orientations.

In the early 1990s, an international survey of textbooks used in university journalism schools and communication departments in Third World countries showed that educational materials originated mainly from the United States (Nordenstreng and Traber 1992, 83). In 1988, Dissanayake (1988) noted that 71 percent of the materials used to teach communication theory in ASEAN and 78 percent of the materials used in South Asia were of North American origin. Over two decades ago, Beltran suggested that “the very conceptualization of the nature of communication, as coming from developed countries, is today being contested in developing ones” (1980, 7). At that time, Schramm (1983) highlighted the central role of the four “founding fathers” of modern communication studies: Hovland, Lasswell, Lazarsfeld and Lewin. Earlier, Tunstall (1977) had suggested that mass communication research was fundamentally an American invention.

In the age of globalisation, the long-held universalism of Western social-science-based communication perspectives has been challenged on a number of issues, the most outstanding of which is its obfuscation of the perceived role of culture in shaping theorisation about communication. In the early 1990s, a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* (1993) on the state of the field confirmed a continuing ferment. Berger (1997, n. p.) noted that international contributions to communication theory have been substantial, yielding diverse and generative perspectives, which “enrich the field by expanding our stock of communication knowledge.” McQuail (2000) observed that despite claims to universality and generality, there is little doubt that media theories are indelibly marked by the cultural context and circumstances of their origin. Cushman and Kincaid (1987, 5) identified three theoretical principles accounting for variations in cultural perspectives on communication: philosophical, processual, and practical.

Like their counterparts in other developing regions, Arab universities and academic institutions have modelled their communication programs on Western standards. They teach communication either by using translated Western books or by drawing on materials written by Arab scholars, but from a highly visible Western perspective. In 1984, representatives of 14 Arab universities with academic communication programs took a rather critical look at their widely used Western-oriented journalism textbooks and called for the development of an authentic, indigenous Arab intellectual input into communication studies (Tash 1984, 337). In his survey of communication research in the Arab world, Ayish (1998) suggested the dominance of a Western-oriented research agenda.

The basic premise of this paper is that the living human experience may be more or less reduced to a communication experience. It is argued here that the human experience is shaped and driven by numerous factors, the most outstanding of which is the worldview. This paper seeks to elaborate a normative Arab-Islamic perspective on communication by drawing on a secular-Islamic Arab

worldview, that seems to have guided Arab intellectual, social, and cultural development for over 14 centuries. According to Wallace (1970, 142-143), the concept of worldview concerns the fundamental assumption of a people about the nature of the world, as systematically expressed in their philosophy, ethics, ritual, and scientific belief. Worldview-based works attempt to define ideas from the point of view of the individual holding them, from inside the culture rather than from outside, and from the normative framework that defines the living human, and hence, communication experience (Mendelson 1968, 576). Berger (1997) identifies the utility of normative communication theories in describing desired criteria by which media systems are structured and operated. In the context of Arab-Islamic communication, a normative approach takes on further significance at a time when Arabs and Muslims at large find themselves on the defensive as they grapple with the cultural and political implications of the September 11 tragedy and the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq. By delineating the normative boundaries of communication in Arab-Islamic culture, this writer hopes to create a new global awareness of the peculiar cultural features of contemporary Arab-Islamic communication patterns.

The Arab-Islamic Worldview

The Arab-Islamic worldview derives from two central sources: a) *secular socio-cultural traditions and values* that either predated Islam and/or were acquired as a result of interactions with foreign cultures by Arab Muslims, and b) *religious Islamic values and attitudes* as embodied in scriptures (the *Holy Qur'an* which is the word of God and the *Sunna* or Prophet Muhammad's sayings and practices), and works of jurisprudence, philosophy, and literature. In the secular Arab worldview, the boundaries of morality are delineated by blood relationships, while no morality in Islam exists without the directive teachings of Allah as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Though they are presented separately here for analytical purposes, the secular-religious components of the Arab-Islamic worldview seem to maintain symbiotic relationships—in many ways operating as an interactive whole. The Arab-Islamic worldview was, in fact, a product of a melting-pot experience in which Arabism and Islamism became two interchangeable concepts as noted by Jameelah (1978).

Secular Components

In pre-Islamic times, the role of religion in Arabian life was limited to multiple-god worshipping cults involving pagan and superstitious beliefs and practices. In that period, Arabs had developed primitive social systems, deriving their worldview from an unwritten code of tribal law and morality that cantered on the concept of dignity (*karama*). The dignity-based code lent itself much to values, such as honour (*sharaf*), genealogy (*nasab*), paternalism (*abawiyya*), and eloquence (*fasaha*).

Honour. The cult of honour in pre-Islamic Arabian society, more than the cult of gods, was the real religion, the real social bond (Rodinson 1981, 165). The concept of honour originally derived from a person's lineage. It also implied courage, the capacity and the will to defend the independence of the group and the chastity and freedom of its women and dependents. It also flowed from the central concept of dignity (*Karama*), a highly charged emotional frame through which the individual determines the worthiness of his/her life.

Genealogy. Blood relationships based on male-line kinship furnished the adhesive element in internal tribal organisations in Arab society. Abu Lughd (1990, 94) noted that while scholars see lineage or segmentation as a description of the socio-political organisation of tribal groups, others see it as an ideology through which the social system is maintained. As a criterion for social standing in the tribal system, genealogy was an important theme of poetic jousting in Arab history.

Researchers have demonstrated a deep interest in investigating the centrality of the family in blood-based Arab social structures. Patai (1973, 81) observed that the traditional Arab family is extended, patriarchal, and endogamous. Barakat pointed out that the family is the nucleus of social organisation and the centre of economic activities in ancient and modern Arab society. For Barakat, family serves as an intermediary between the individual and society and the institutions through which individuals inherit socio-cultural and political allegiance (1985, 171). Throughout Arabian history, allegiance to families and tribes has been a defining political concept. Family and tribe-based power structures continue to dominate the contemporary political arrangements in many families regardless of their varying ideological orientations.

Genealogy also implies a male-dominated society, which gave preferential treatment to male over female children for their perpetuation of family blood-based relationships. This kinship feature suggests that an Arab is submerged in the group and seems to find himself lost and powerless outside tribal arrangements.

Paternalism. Paternalism describes a system of social relations premised on the assumption of the inferiority of others to make enlightened decisions independently, and, therefore, to be always dependent for their well-being on the benevolence of a superior authority (Bennett 1968, 472). This feature was characteristic of patriarchal social Arab systems at micro and macro levels (Sharabi 1988, Barakat 1985, Patai 1973). Sharabi noted that patriarchy essentially defines a special kind of socio-political structure with a specific value system and forms of discourse and practices, based on a distinctive mode of economic organisation (1988, 15). In one way or another, the concept suggests a central source of power, from which authority flows in its social and political manifestations.

Eloquence. Oral expression in prose or poetry was a highly valued practice in pre-Islamic Arab tribalism. This communicative potential was instrumental not only in asserting the deeply ingrained individualism in Bedouin society, but in solidifying the status of the tribe with whom the poet or speaker was associated. The appreciation of eloquence was intrinsically derived from the versatility and musical beauty of Arabic, an offshoot of the Semitic family of languages, which includes, among others, Hebrew and Amharic. In addition to its high derivative potential, Arabic also possesses an elaborate system of affixes, which allows the language to be both rhymic and rhythmic, making it strongly conducive to poetry and rhymed utterances. It also consists of numerous stylistic variations, drawing on rhetorical devices capable of delivering precise shades of meanings, be it praise, derogation, emphasis, or simple descriptive utterances.

Throughout Arabian history, language has been central to the definition of a collective identity. Jabra (1988, 260) pointed out that "it may seem like an oversimplification to say that one of the operative definitions of an Arab in the last 100 years has been "anyone who speaks Arabic as his or her own language and conse-

quently feels as an Arab." Bishai (1973, 66) noted that Arabic, especially the literary style, has been—and still is—to Arabs a vehicle of expression, but also a religious symbol, a national identity, and an articulation of their achievements.

The Arabs' fascination with their language dates back to the pre-Islamic *Jahilyyya* era, which represents an early, primitive stage of Arab civilisation. Cultural forms inherited from that era include prose and poetry, and both were important tools in inter-tribal communications.

By virtue of Arabic's musical beauty, Arab culture has been characterised as highly oral, and favouring conversational modes of communication to pictures and written texts. In the *Jahilyyya* period (up to 622), tribal and inter-tribal poetic and oratory contests were commonplace, attracting crowds of anxious people, some coming from remote places.

The oral nature of Arab culture was emphasised in the Islamic era. *The Holy Qur'an*, meaning "something being recited," was revealed to the Prophet who had to read it aloud to his scribes to enable them to memorize it. The first *sura* (chapter) of the *Holy Qur'an* starts with the imperative verb, "read." The Prophet of Islam, being illiterate himself, relied heavily on his oral means of expression to disseminate the word of God.

As for pictorial art, historical accounts seemed to reflect a generally negative Islamic position on producing images of animate beings, and for this reason, visual art was underdeveloped in Arab-Islamic history. But this should not suggest total absence of creative, visual works in the Arab-Islamic civilisation. Artists actually began to focus their creative potential on the written word of God, as represented in the *Holy Qur'an*, leading to the development of calligraphy as a major feature in Arab Islamic arts. Arab calligraphers like Ibn Muqla (d. 940), Ibn Al Bawwab (d. 1022), and Al Musta'ismi (d. 1299) contributed much to the development of new stylistic designs in circular, vertical, and horizontal shapes.

Islamic Components

It should be noted that significant components of this pre-Islamic Arab worldview have survived in the Islamic era of Arab history, but with an important difference: they came to be governed by a comprehensive Islamic *sharia*, or law, rather than by the unwritten code of tribal law and morality. Dignity-based concepts of honour, genealogy, paternalism, and eloquence were subsumed under more important Islamic values, like *tawhid* (Allah is the only God), *iman* (belief), *umma* (community), *ibadah* (worship), and *ilm* (knowledge). Pre-Islamic polytheistic paganism that centered on tribal gods was totally abolished in Islam as it contradicts the very conception of the oneness of God.

Iman. *Iman* involves belief in God, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers, and in the Last Day (Day of Judgment). It reflects the nature of Islam as an uncompromising monotheism with a simple enthusiastic faith in the supreme rule of a Transcendent Being.

In Islam *Iman* is a private affair, reflecting an individual's personal relationship with his Creator. It is a primary pre-requisite state of belief, on which a comprehensive system of values, attitudes, and devotional rituals is based. Because of its personal nature within the self, *iman* cannot be verified through explicit statements, or even actions. God is the only one who knows the authenticity of a person's belief. "

Tawhid. The concept of *tawhid* emphasises the oneness of Allah, the Creator, and the Omnipotent, who is the only one worthy of worship. Belief in the existence of partners to God is termed *shirk*, or association, an unforgivable sin in the Islamic faith. Personality cult, common in political systems, is viewed as antithetical to *Tawhid*, because it ignores God's interventions by attributing achievements to mortals.

The concept of *tawhid* also implies belief in the unity of God, man, and nature. In the unitary perspective of Islam, all aspects of life, as well as degrees of cosmic manifestations, are governed by a single principle and unified by a common centre. There is nothing outside the power of God, and in a more esoteric sense, nothing outside His Being, for there cannot be two orders of reality (Nasr 1981, 7).

Ibadah. The ultimate goal of life in Islam is to assert man's servility to God. Unlike followers of other monotheistic religions, Arabs came to believe in Islam as more than just a religion; it is a *deen* or a "complete way of life," deriving its comprehensiveness from the concept of *ibadah* (worship). Islam considers every virtuous action which is sincerely performed and which aims at carrying out the commandments of God—thus seeking His pleasure—an act of worship, for which individuals would be rewarded. Even eating, drinking, sleeping, and such worldly actions which legitimately satisfy physical needs and even yield sensuous pleasures, become acts of worship, provided they are performed with true religious motives (Zarqa 1976, 109).

Umma. The advent of Islam, a word which means the "act of resignation to God," brought about a new universal social system, stressing piety, *taqwa*, to the exclusion of genealogy as a criterion of social status. From divided clans, engaged in inter-tribal conflicts, and drawing on foreign powers for survival, Arabs were transformed into an *umma*, or community, with a new worldview. In *umma*, sovereignty belongs only to God to Whose will all human beings, rulers, and the ruled, are subjected. Mowlana (1993, 15) noted that the notion of *umma* is conceived as universal and not as subject to territorial, linguistic, racial, and nationalistic limitations. While Western conceptions of community seem to have placed relationships among community members mostly within a secular frame, Islam considers *umma* an epitome of the harmony and perfection of God's creation, transcending boundaries of time and space.

In the Islamic community, individuals should dedicate their daily existence to the achievement of a greater ideal: a harmonious community consistent with the vision of the *Qur'an*. Between individuals and their family there is an obligation of mutual support, and between individuals and their society there is a bond of cooperation for the benefit of the whole and the protection and well-being of the individual (Boullata 1985, 61).

Ilm. While the domain of knowledge in the pre-Islamic period was confined mainly to pagan traditions, and literary and folkloric modes of expression, the advent of Islam heralded remarkable developments not only in the scope of knowledge, but in its epistemology. *The Qur'an* represents a linguistic achievement so high that the most eloquent Arabs were unable to match it despite their record of distinguished literary craftsmanship.

The concept of knowledge, *ilm*, has been taken as a point of reference for most theoretical endeavours to elaborate an Islamic communication paradigm. Sardar (1993, 43) notes that:

Communication in Islam is intrinsically related to the fundamental Qur'anic concept of ilm. Often translated as "knowledge," ilm is one of the most frequently occurring terms in the Qur'an. As a defining concept of the worldview of Islam, its influence permeates all aspects of Muslim individual and societal behaviour.

The concept of *ilm* implies different, but important sources of knowledge acquisition. The primary source is revelation, as in the case of the *Holy Qur'an*. Muslims are enjoined to submit to revealed knowledge through what is termed "heart-based" belief. In the meantime, Islam emphasises the role of reason, *aql*, in rationally producing man's faith in the Divine.

Mainstream philosophical thought was concerned with establishing harmony between reason and revelation. Contemplation and observation resulted in knowledge of natural phenomena and, finally, the discovery of the existence of God together with a large body of ethical values. In other words, mainstream philosophers independently reached the main principles of Islam, suggesting that both, philosophy and religion, are one. Human reason and divine revelation converge in a single point of faith.

A Normative Arab-Islamic Communication Perspective

The manner in which the Arab-Islamic worldview, in its secular (dignity-based dimensions like honour, genealogy, eloquence and paternalism) and religious (*iman*, *tawhid*, *ibadah*, *umma* and *ilm*) components bears on perceptions of living experiences was bound to shape Arab communication in a special way. In this normative perspective, the writer argues that an Arab-Islamic conception of communication would perhaps be better grasped in the context of four dichotomous themes: *individualism-conformity*, *transcendentalism-existentialism*, *rationality-intuition*, and *egalitarianism-hierarchy*. Tensions within the contemporary Arab communication system at interpersonal and institutional levels lend themselves more to built-in incompatibilities between those patterns and the normative perspective advanced here and modern media norms and practices.

Individualism-Conformity

Individualism is a central value in the Arab-Islamic worldview. However, unlike its conception in Western culture, as a unifying concept that may set a limit to group involvement, individualism in Arab-Islamic cultures is composed of both, individual and group identification. In secular Arab traditions, the concepts of lineage, honour, paternalism, and eloquence were conducive to highly visible individualistic orientations on the part of the Arabs. These concepts were viewed as pillars of the extremely revered notion of the ego-cantered dignity. To live and die in dignity is a life pattern held in high esteem in Arab culture. To deprive an Arab of his dignity is to transform his life into a worthless pursuit.

The individualist-conformist orientations in Arab-Islamic culture produce two distinctive patterns of communication processes. In the first pattern, generally as-

sociated with secular Arab traditions, communication is a process of liberating the individual from the shackles of conformity to a collective lineage-based system and of assisting in the assertion of a code of dignity. On the other hand, communication in Islam, spiritual and social, denotes a process of facilitating the individual's integration into the larger *umma*. It is a process of harmonizing the believing inner self with the collective believer's self of the community. Falling within the concept of *ibadah*, all communication acts are used not only as tools for harmonizing the individual self with a collective ethos, but they are elevated to the status of acts of worship, thus deserving God's rewards.

Transcendentalism-Existentialism

Reality in the Arab-Islamic culture is conceived of as comprising two domains, one belonging to the world of idealist imagination and divine sacredness of a Power Transcendental, the other to mundane matters and the profanity of sensible existence. The first world is perfect and absolute, the second imperfect and relative. We become conscious of the first domain through heart and intellect, while our knowledge of the second domain is based on first-hand encounters. Both domains are reconciled in the *Holy Qur'an* and the Prophet's *Sunna*. Both are the key sources of Islamic *Sharia* that guide Muslim's worldly practices within the context of a grand divine scheme of creation.

Because the transcendent world is associated with divine absolutism and sacredness, it was natural to view it as far more superior to the low world of relativism and profanity. In different life situations, the transcendental world has become a guiding light for dealing with the mundane world as Mahmoud (1971) notes.

The dual metaphysical and materialistic character of the Arab-Islamic culture seems to have given rise to a communication that thrives on both, the surrealistic/imaginative and the physical. In secular and Islamic Arab culture, this feature was nowhere more conspicuous than in the emphasis on form to the exclusion of meaning in the Arabic language. The concept of form embraces not only the inflated connotations of words and phrases, but also the musical nature of Arabic as a central component of an intrinsically oral Arab culture. Rhetorical devices like hyperbole, metaphors, and similes produce flowery expressions that outmatch the reality they are supposed to denote. And when they do so, they do it in the least direct and explicit of terms. Words are important, not because of the meanings they convey, but because of their musical beauty.

Intuitive-Rational Processes

Revelation is the most primary source of knowledge for Muslims, because an individual attains a belief in God through the intuition of the heart. Revelation-induced belief requires that a Muslim submit to the message of God by trusting in a Power Transcendental through Whom every thing would become possible. To relate to God All Mighty, a believer would have to invoke a complete set of intuitive assumptions and values that conjure up images of hope and fear, reward and punishment, Paradise and Hell, good and evil, or this life and the life thereafter.

The heart is the chief "processing" apparatus. The individual surrenders to the revealed message of God as an absolute truth and does not question its validity. Heart-rooted communicative processes are likely to produce impulsive and ritual-

istic communication that thrives more on information sharing than on a rational exchange of messages. Indulgence in a communication experience is not a pre-meditated act, but rather it is a ritual, or a habit, that confers legitimacy on the living experience.

Although intuitive communication is an important component of interpersonal social communication in the Arab-Islamic culture, its intra-personal manifestations are overwhelming. One of the outstanding features of Arab-Islamic communication is that it is inwardly oriented before it takes on more pervasive outward configurations.

On the other hand, Arab communication has a significant rational component, which has been responsible for various Arab intellectual and scientific contributions to civilisation. Reason, *aql*, was viewed as a blessing from God through which an individual has been elevated to a higher status in the hierarchy of creation. As such, a reason-based thought process often produces rational, calculated, and influence-oriented communication. This communication pattern cannot be fully associated with secular Arab culture, however, simply because the concept of dignity, on which secular components of the Arab-Islamic worldview are based, lends itself more to a worldview of self-conceived idealism that may not be adequately rationalised.

Egalitarian-Hierarchical

The egalitarian message of Islam is noted in that all Muslims are equal before God, and the most favourite to God is the most pious. Sovereignty belongs exclusively to God, while social power is bestowed on institutions through a process of popular delegation. The Islamic caretaker, or *wali al amr*, who is the ruler in a generic sense, owes the community the establishment of justice in exchange for obedience by community members. At the family level, males are granted *quwama* or responsibility for females. Parents are also provided with a high status within the family. In Arab secular traditions, authority is vested in individuals like the father, the tribal chief or leader, the elderly, the male child, and the rich.

Imbalanced power structures have produced an Arab-Islamic communication that is paternalistic, reflecting centralised control over what is to be communicated and how. Paternalism is rationalised on the basis of the need to maintain and reinforce the collective interests of the population rather than on furthering individual objectives of patriarchy.

The concept of paternalistic authority has spawned perceptions of Arab-Islamic communication as power. Clan dignitaries used to act as mediators in conflicts in the community more or less by virtue of their communication capabilities. Tribal poets were viewed as part of political propaganda machines operating in times of crisis, and as symbols of socio-political status in times of peace. Like today's media representatives, tribal chiefs and state leaders counted on poets and speakers to defend their tribal and national interest against foes.

Implications for Contemporary Arab Communication

The formulation of new communication perspectives independent of Western theoretical traditions has always been a challenging task. Over the past decades, numerous generations of communication students and scholars around the world seemed to have been socialised into accepting a presumed universal validity of

Western theoretical offerings in the field of communication. But as McQuail (2000) noted, Western ethno-centric media biases have induced the search for other perspectives relevant to the emerging cultural contexts of other nations. Based on the notion of worldview as an anchoring point for the human living experience, and hence for the communication experience at micro and macro levels, this writer offers a new perspective for understanding the roots of communication patterns in the Arab-Islamic context.

The Arab-Islamic worldview, with its secular-Islamic components has given rise to peculiar communication patterns marked by four dichotomous sets of values: *individualism-conformity*, *transcendentalism-existentialism*, *intuition-rationality* and *egalitarianism-hierarchy*. These values represent conceptual constructs that may be subjected to scientific investigation for further elaboration.

On their face value, the four dichotomous constructs may embody a paradox that is bound to yield seriously defective communication patterns in Arab-Islamic societies. Hence, one may conclude that communication in the Arab-Islamic culture is orally based, asymmetrical and monologist, metaphysically coloured, and impulse-oriented, while playing the dual role of integrating or liberating the individual into the community or from the shackles of conformity, respectively. In this communicative experience, the individual seems to be torn between liberation and integration, intuition and reason, sacred idealism and profane realism, and egalitarianism and authoritarianism.

The indigenous communication system of the Arab world continues to bear significant features of the normative perspective suggested by this paper. In male-dominated, nomadic and rural communities, where extended family and tribal ties are the strongest, communication thrives on the oral and asymmetrical level. This feature has been utilised in development communication relating to health, population, and environment issues in many Arab countries. In many cases, oral, interpersonal communication has been found to be far more superior to mass communication.

On the other hand, applying the four normative dichotomies to contemporary Arab communication at the beginning of the twenty-first century necessitates addressing a set of serious problems that face media systems in the Arab world. In as much as contemporary Arab communicators in print and broadcast media sectors seem attracted to professional, Western modes of communication, they continue to be pulled back to the normative cultural values that define their own media experience. The introduction of the World Wide Web and satellite television to the Arab world implied a phasing out of the orally based indigenous communication system (Ayish 2001).

Imported social and cultural values and structures as well as professional media practices have brought about significant disruptions of traditional social, political, and communication arrangements in the Arab world. The new media have seriously eroded the traditional role of indigenous communication networks in the Arab world. The launch of new private satellite television networks, like Al Jazeera, the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), Al Arabiyya, and Orbit Television and Radio Network offer Arab audiences, more than ever before, new news and entertainment outlets.

A central component of the normative Arab-Islamic communication perspective that continues to maintain high visibility in modern times is the use of classi-

cal Arabic as a language of communication. On the other hand, radio and television programmers are using increasingly (especially drama series) a colloquial Arabic, evident also in folkloric and modern songs. Egyptian colloquial Arabic, smooth, musical, and terse, has especially proved successful in entertainment programs. Although classical Arabic continues to be the language of presentation at major radio and television talk shows and drama works, the use of colloquial Arabic has gained new grounds with increased local drama production and the launch of some locally oriented media like the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and Lebanese Future Television.

In addition to the dual classical-colloquial character of mass communication language in the Arab World, the use of flowery, broadly phrased, and hyperbolic language is typical, especially in official programs and information materials (Browne 1980). The fact that most media personnel in the Arab World consist of poets, novelists, and literary experts, seemed to have contributed to this feature. Journalists with no professional training in communication had to draw on their literary background for writing newspaper articles or broadcast news and program scripts. Mowlana (1988, 838) observed that journalism and literature are practically synonymous in most Middle Eastern countries, and the press is and always has been considered a respectable vehicle for literary productions. The government monopoly of broadcast organisations meant that political communication continues to be marked by the use of a flowery and hyperbolic discourse. This has been recently demonstrated in Saddam Hussein's use of a strong flowery language to stir up support for his cause among Iraqi and Arab people during the Anglo-American war on Iraq.

An enduring pictorial aspect of Arabic that seems to reflect the greater value of form over content is presented by calligraphy. Most Arab newspapers and TV stations employ professional calligraphers to produce different designs of Arabic script, especially for news headlines and TV program titles. The use of some three-dimensional and animated Arabised fonts has been an important feature of local television productions in the Arab world. The development of this pictorial art, however, has been hampered by the introduction of computerised fonts, which are used in Arab media as part of modern, desktop publishing programs. Computerised video word processing packages are also common in Arab TV stations. They provide a wide variety of font sizes, shapes, and types like *Kufi*, *Baghdad*, *Giza*, and *Andalusi*.

Another important legacy of the traditional Arab-Islamic communication model in modern mass communication is the paternalistic approach to communication. Rugh (1979, 8) noted that political patronage is a major feature of the press in the Arab World. It takes the form of overt and covert government subsidies, although a few newspapers have managed to survive without them. This paternalistic trend has receded in an evolving private media environment, although strong government influence on new media structures seems to turn against full media independence.

The high credibility accorded by Arabs to word-of-mouth communication has been reflected in avid radio listening, compared to other media exposures. In his discussion of radio listening in the Arab World, Boyd suggested that radio seems to have been a more favourite medium because of its oral nature (Boyd 1994). The BBC Arabic Service, launched in January 1938, was the first truly international

radio station to capitalize on the oral character of Arab culture. Over the past five decades, the service has managed to build a solid base of listeners whose loyalty to BBC Arabic programs seems to have been maintained, in spite of growing competition (Ayish 1991). By the mid 1990s, however, the rise of television as a regional medium of communication seems to have dealt a serious blow to the traditional role of radio as the dominant tool of mass communication in the Middle East.

Another characteristic relates to the use of mass media to foster Islamic (spiritual and temporal) values and themes. Religious programs devoted to explaining certain aspects of life as comprehensively conceived in Islam occupy a considerable portion of print media space and broadcast time. They include Qur'anic and Hadith (Prophet sayings) interpretations, interviews and discussions, and even drama, dealing exclusively with outstanding events and issues in Arab-Islamic history. Since their inception, Arab radio and television stations have taken on the habit of broadcasting Qur'anic readings and religious chants upon their sign-on transmission.

Another area affected by the introduction of new media into the Arab world is the development of media codes of ethics to guide communication work. All Arab media charters and codes of ethics include references to freedom of expression and speech. They also incorporate provisions calling for penal actions against violation of religious, moral and security interests. Although those codes draw primarily on Arab-Islamic norms of morality, they seem also to be in tune with Western ethical orientations.

Increasing liberalisation and political democratisation in the 1990s seems to have been brought to bear on Islamic ethical components of Arab media work as journalists push for more Western-style freedom of information that may be incompatible with more restrictive, Islamic views of media work.

Conclusion

In this age of globalisation, socio-political, economic and technological transformations sweeping the Arab world are bound to bear on culture as the anchoring point for understanding indigenous peculiarities in this part of the world. The growing realisation among social scientists of culture as the driving force in society gives credence to the role of cultural norms in theory building. The development of four dialectical constructs regarding Arab-Islamic communication has been a modest attempt in this direction. Although communication realities in the Arab world seem to defy the applicability of this normative perspective, there are enduring aspects of media work that strongly reflect this approach. Although Arab media draw on Western-oriented modes of communication production and distribution, their paternalistic structures, discourse, and functions lend themselves more to inherited norms and practices. In light of the notion of the human experience as a communication experience, one may infer the significance of this normative effort to shed light on the current communication patterns in the Arab region.

For decades, Arabism and Islam have been enigmatic to the Western mind. Century-old Western images of Arabians as barbaric, fanatic, lusty, and ruthless people have spawned contemporary stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists, fundamentalists, or as greedy and uncivilised. At no time have these perceptions been more well-entrenched than in the post 9/11 era, when mutual mistrust seems to have degen-

erated into a clash of civilisation game, in which universal values and norms shared by both sides of the divide have been prime casualties. Religious fanaticism and neo-colonial war mongerism have combined to preclude voices of reason and arguments for balance emanating from global, intellectual debates on human coexistence in the context of cultural diversity. As the world seems headed for more ideologically-motivated, head-on collisions between civilisations, the role of culture in international relations seems to be taking a hard beating, while the intellectual community is marginalised in the ongoing confrontation. When hard-core ideologues on both sides are perceived as heroes, chances for harmony and coexistence seem slimmer than ever before. A major consequence of this trend is the questioning of the role of the social scientist (including communication theorists) in this evolving development.

The relationship between communication and culture has been one of the most widely researched areas in contemporary media literature. It has been argued that as much as communication is a reflector of cultural values and norms, it is also an embodiment of culture. Anthropologists and those affiliated with cultural studies, like Carey and Geertz, have approached communication from ritualistic rather than functional positions, ruling out the possibility of investigating communication practices independent of the cultural features of communities. This writer joins these approaches with an alternative line of research that diverges from American-dominated views of communication as a rational, cognizant, and goal-oriented act. In this critical time of Western-Arab Islamic disharmony, the elaboration of normative culture-based perspectives on how people on both sides of this divide manage their communication acts and rituals should serve to narrow gaps of misunderstanding and misperception.

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