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# WORKING PRINCIPLES
## FOR
# AN ISLAMIC MODEL
## IN
# MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION

### Suhaib Jamal al Barzinji

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Suhaib J. al Barzinji was born in Baghdad, Iraq, on the 25th of Ramadan, 1387 A.H. (December 27, 1967 A.C.). In 1989 (1409), he received a B.S. in Finance and Banking from the University of Maryland at College Park. In 1994 (1414), he received an M.A. in Television and Film from the University of Maryland at College Park.

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He is the founder and director of Astrolabe Pictures, Inc., which was established in 1995 (1415) for the production and distribution of high quality Islamic media products.

*Spur Kazm.*

*many Sigments*

*Consit agenda.*

# WORKING PRINCIPLES FOR AN ISLAMIC
# MODEL IN MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION

First Edition
(1419 AH/1998 AC)

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Suhaib Jamal al Barzinji

*Academic Dissertations (6)*

DEDICATION

To

My wonderful wife, Afeefa

Without whom the completion of this work
would have been impossible

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# Preface

The International Institute of Islamic Thought is pleased to present to its readers its first book published on Islamic media. Originally, the book was a thesis for which the author was awarded the M.A. degree from the University of Maryland in 1994. Dealing with communication media in the Muslim world, it compares the international Islamic view to contemporary media views. It also presents a set of practical principles upon which a model of Islamic communication through media can be based. The book ends with recommendations and research project proposals for the future.

Research in Islamic media is still in its infancy, especially in English. This book, presented by IIIT to the students of Islamization of knowledge, is a recent contribution to this great civilizational project.

We hope IIIT will continue to present other works in this important field, thereby providing a continuous accumulation of knowledge in communication sciences from an Islamic perspective.

Allah is the provider of success.

International Institute of Islamic Thought
Al Muḥarram 1419/May 1998

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

Since the early 1960s, a revolution has been taking place around the globe, the effects of which shall continue to reverberate well into the next century. Cultures once isolated in remote regions of the Pacific, in sub-Saharan Africa, and on South American mountaintops are now privy to the everyday affairs of people in great metropolises formerly heard about only through stories told by the occasional wayfarer. The airwaves are now flooded with thousands of voices in every conceivable language, belonging to every imaginable culture, ideology and political persuasion. The number of periodicals circulating continues to grow exponentially: for every idea there is now a platform; for every pastime, a magazine; and for every profession, a journal. As technology evolves with every passing hour, so does the pace of this incredible information frenzy.

No aspect of our lives is left untouched by this "mass media explosion." How we perceive ourselves, our reality, and the world we live in is arguably molded and shaped for us by the media. Our fears and dreams; our sense of the acceptable and the unacceptable; and our tastes in art, food and fashion are dictated to us daily by what we read, hear, and see. Indeed, mass media may soon replace traditional institutions such as family, church and school as the primary source of socialization for the young (Rosengren and Reimer 1986, p. 268).

In a free society such as ours, we can at least draw solace from the fact that, for every belief, a counter-belief can be introduced and given the opportunity to grow and flourish. We have a remarkably diverse assortment of choices and alternatives to choose from. Because most of the population

is literate and reasonably well educated, print media (newspapers, magazines and books) are as accessible as non-print media. The availability of so many forms enables a given medium to check and balance the other types. This availability permits individuals to compare, contrast, and filter what they receive, and helps them distinguish between fact and opinion, between the true and the outrageous, between propaganda and reality. One can weigh and judge before submitting to a point of view, or embracing a lifestyle.

In the wake of the introduction and rapid development of mass media methodologies in Western societies, their methods have by and large become the industry standard worldwide. Although many Western media professionals and theorists claim that their established methods and norms are totally objective and value free, there are strong arguments to the contrary. Many of these methodologies are influenced by an underlying value system stemming from a secular-humanist worldview. Such a worldview includes certain assumptions about art and its role in society, and reflects concepts regarding beauty, entertainment, news, and information. These assumptions are reflected in the media that are produced. When these Western, secular-humanist methodologies and concepts are copied and implemented in mass media addressing non-Western cultures, without considering local values and traditions, a clash inevitably occurs.

The effect of this clash is greatest in Third World societies where millions of illiterate and uneducated people tune in to state-run television and radio for long hours. Because they have no access to alternative media, and lack the education and tools necessary to analyze the various messages being received, such people are unable to discern among propaganda; culturally compatible and value re-enforcing messages; and culturally alien, or negative and obtrusive influences. Most Third-World countries are run by autocratic governments that dictate and manipulate media policy. In their drive towards modernization, these regimes often copy wholesale the media models of the Western nations they seek to emulate. Thus, entire cultures, value systems, and national identities are twisted and subverted to conform to the aspirations and political goals of the ruling elite.

Most of the world's Muslim population falls into this category of people whose cultural and religious identity, value system, self-concept, and confidence are being eroded through continuous exposure to media influences rooted in an alien worldview. In pre-revolutionary Iran, disc jockeys from Los Angeles and London were hired to run the broadcast media. Television

consisted mainly of American, Italian, French and English shows. Local productions emphasized national-secular and pre-Islamic items, but never traditional religious and cultural values. This caused such a great degree of alienation, that it played a key role in hastening the 1979 Islamic revolution (Mowlana 1989c, p. 37).

A basic Islamic concept is that God created man and prescribed a certain code of life as the correct one for him. This code, Islam, is more than just a "religion" in the traditional, restricted connotation of the word. Islam does not confine its scope to man's private life, but applies to all aspects of human existence. It provides guidance on all levels—individual and social, material and moral, economic and political, legal and cultural, national and international (Ahmad 1980, pp. 28–37). Therefore, any media system addressing Muslim society must be rooted in an Islamic value system in order to maintain Islam's holistic way of life and avoid dissonance.

This research will focus on the effects of imported media models on various elements of Muslim society, and will investigate the extent to which these elements are, or are not, threatened. Subsequently, this book will propose guidelines for countering and alleviating any harmful effects. I will also formulate preliminary principles for an alternative media model, based on assumptions and concepts rooted in an Islamic worldview. The following fundamental questions and assumptions will be examined in the first three chapters:

Chapter 1: What effect do existing mass media models and their programming have on the Muslim populations they serve? In this discussion, particular emphasis will be placed on the media models currently used in addressing Muslim societies, and the influence they have on the identity and perceptions of their audience.

We begin with a brief overview of the.current state of mass media in the Muslim world. Colonialism is shown to have had a lasting influence on the languages, media and sociopolitical institutions of Muslim countries. The forms of mass media adopted by post-independence Muslim countries vary according to the political/economic system that has emerged. An analysis is then made of the current state of mass media in the three predominant regime types: autocratic-socialist, autocratic-capitalist and democratic-capitalist. Once the existing framework and structure of mass media in the Muslim world have been outlined, the discussion concentrates on problems arising from the current media systems and their effect on local beliefs, values and culture. Problems are arranged into four key categories: those spe-

cific to the commercial media models, specific to the ideology of the media profession, specific to the television and radio industries, and specific to the flow of news. The effects on the local culture of imported programming, alien values, consumerism, and an elitist orientation will also be examined.

Chapter 2: What is meant by the terms "Islamic worldview" and "Islamic culture," and what are their underlying philosophical and ideological principles? What are the Islamic concepts regarding media, and their uses and methods? For this stage of the research, I have developed the groundwork and ideological guidelines for an Islamic mass media model. Mass media concepts are deduced from traditional sources of Islamic knowledge and related to the overall Islamic worldview. These sources primarily include the Qur'an (the divinely revealed Book of guidance for all Muslims), and the practices and sayings of the Prophet, Muhammad. Examination of these sources will clarify what the Islamic world-view is regarding the role of man in society, the underlying purpose of the media and communication, and the means by which this purpose can be achieved. Then, through further analysis, I will construct a methodology and ethical code particular to an Islamic media model.

Once the Islamic worldview is clarified with regard to the media and their use, content, purposes, tools, philosophy and methodologies, it will be possible in the following chapter to identify a set of guidelines and criteria by which to measure and produce media suitable for Muslim populations.

Chapter 3: How do the concepts outlined in the previous chapter apply, or adapt, to today's media requirements? What critical elements and conventions in mass media production need to be analyzed and re-evaluated from an Islamic perspective? What would an Islamic methodology be with regard to these particular elements?

In this chapter, I will formulate working principles for an alternative Islamic model for mass media. Such a model would provide viable mass communication to Muslim populations while avoiding the problems caused by imported mass media methods. The mass media concepts previously deduced from the traditional sources of Islamic knowledge are woven together to determine a shape and form for Islamic mass media. The following elements of mass media are specifically discussed from an Islamic perspective: aesthetics, free speech, the media professional, the media audience and, finally, the functional and structural elements involved in a media model. Entertainment and news programming are dealt with from an Islamic point of view, as are issues such as media regulation, economics

and ownership. The conclusions arrived at through this analysis are proposed as working principles for an alternative Islamic model for the mass media. These principles, hopefully, will serve as guidelines for further research towards constructing a complete and coherent Islamic media model.

The scope of this study will be confined to those elements of the mass media that are readily available to, and directly affect, the majority of Third-World populations—i.e., primarily the television and radio industries. I have excluded the film, recording and publishing industries from the present discussion except where they are particularly relevant. Also, the limited extent of this study would preclude any speculation regarding possible audience reaction to the proposed media model. Since Muslim audiences are very diverse in their cultures and in their interpretation of Islam as it pertains to daily life, any attempt to gauge or anticipate audience response would necessarily require additional, more focused research and fieldwork.

Because this study primarily addresses Muslim populations, it is important to note that, statistically, Muslims account for nearly one billion of the world's inhabitants. Of this number, 26 percent live in the Indian subcontinent, 17 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 18 percent in Southeast Asia, 18 percent in the Arab world, 10 percent in Central Asia and China, and 10 percent in the non-Arab Middle East (Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan). Latin America, Europe and Australia have significant numbers as well. The U.S. Muslim population is somewhere between five and seven million (Islamic Text Society 1989, p. 32). In this study, the term Muslim world specifically denotes those countries in which the majority of the population (over 50 percent) is Muslim. This includes almost 50 independent countries, with a combined Muslim population of over 750 million people. These countries are located throughout North and Central Africa, the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and South and Southeast Asia (Rahman 1987, p. 12). All of the countries constituting the Muslim world are considered to be part of the "developing" or "Third" World. This means that they are still in the process of transforming from an agrarian economy to an industrial one.

Skeptics might disagree with the basic premise that the media can operate from within a religious code. This disagreement may be justified if religion is narrowly confined to one's personal life and family, as is the case in secular society. But even in a society such as ours, there still remains an underlying value system that organizes daily life. Although Western values

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are not explicitly derived from a particular "religion," they are heavily root-ed in the ideology of secular humanism, with strong Judeo-Christian ele-ments.[1] In Muslim society, however, the Islamic faith does not play the restricted role that religion does in the West. Islam is a total way of life that clearly defines how individual, social, political, economic and other facets of life should be ordered and maintained. What is being recommended by this research is the replacement of a secular-humanist value system by an Islamic one as a basis for mass media addressing Muslim audiences.

This type of recommendation might raise concern about Islamic "funda-mentalism," or adherence to the principles of the faith in a fanatical or rad-ical manner. "Fundamentalism," as applied to Muslim populations, is a misnomer. It does not refer to an anti-modern or ultra-traditionalist move-ment, as it does with reference to certain Christian sects that technically exemplify the term. Rather, the Muslim world is undergoing a process of "setting its house in order," which refers to a rejuvenation and reaffirma-tion of a set of principles and ideals that does not take institutions back in time, but instead reorganizes and revitalizes a society to strengthen its sense of identity (Sajjad 1993, p. 85).

Adherents of this movement claim that this identity is not post-colonial, neo-capitalist, secular-humanist, or anything else of the kind, but rather a clinging to the very roots of what it means to be Muslim. The images in the media of anti-Western demonstrators, of religious leaders exhorting the masses to curse "the Great Satan," and of "terrorist" attempts to force Islamic beliefs down the throats of innocent people are not only incorrect images of this revitalization movement within Islam, but are also starkly opposed to this movement.

Adherents to the revitalization movement instead speak of grassroots attempts at re-integrating faith into daily life. A more appropriate image would be that of children reading verses of the Qur'an in the original Arabic, and being taught the meanings in their own native languages so they can internalize the teachings and implement them in their personal lives. Scholars in the movement hold open debates about the relevance and importance of various theological points. Dialogue is considered vital and

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1.    Throughout the remainder of this book, the use of the terms "West" or "Western" will interchangeably denote a particular geographical region and, when used in a con-text alluding to a particular ideology, value-system, or methodology, denote a world-view rooted in secular humanism with Judeo-Christian influences. Although this work-ing definition is simplistic, it is necessary in drawing contrasts with the Islamic world-view.

imperative for a viable Islamic state. Thus, every element of society undergoes a process of scrutiny and discussion before it is accepted as a part of the whole.[2]

In this process, an Islamic media model cannot achieve all of its purported goals by existing solely in and of itself. It must operate from within a total Islamic state. This means that all institutions in a society—political, economic and social—need to be Islamized so that a coherent, holistic Islamic system is in place. Only then can the media model be "plugged in" to play its particular role with any effect. Currently, most Muslim-world institutions remain secular. Therefore, the proposed Muslim media model must remain theoretical, until the right preconditions exist.

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2.   The question may be raised throughout this book "Whose Islam is being represented here?" One goal of the revitalist movement has been to "internationalize" Islam—Muslims everywhere are reading or hearing the same interpretations of the spiritual sources because of this movement and therefore are more unified in their assessment of what the Islamic dictates are. Also characteristic of the movement's approach is to return to the sources and reinterpret them in light of contemporary challenges and scenarios. This is the tradition and methodology which I subscribe to and therefore utilize in this study.

# ABOUT THIS BOOK

Research in Islamic media is still in its infancy, especially in English. This book, presented by IIIT to the students of Islamization of knowledge, is a recent contribution to this great civilizational project.

It deals with the communication media in the Muslim world, and compares the international Islamic view to the contemporary media views. It also presents a set of practical principles upon which a model of Islamic communication through media can be based. The book ends with recommendations and research project proposals for the future in the area of Islamic media.

It is a real accumulation of knowledge in communication sciences from an Islamic perspective.