

Community Paradigm in Media Studies: A Response to Hamid Mowlana

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Abstract

The paper in its first part discusses two early initiatives to study media in Muslim contexts: Hamid Mowlana's proposal to apply an Islamic community paradigm as opposed to information society paradigm to study media in Muslim contexts and International Association for Media and Communication Research's (IAMCR) initiative to form a working group on Islam and media to study the universal principles of communication in Islam. These initiatives, the paper argues that, come to a standstill as their projects unfold and the focus then becomes one that highlights either the similarities between Islamic and non-Islamic communication practices or the instrumentalist role of media in Muslim societies. Such an irony is of course inevitable when one does not pay enough attention to the details that structures the modalities of knowledge production and dissemination in a given society that direct the course of information/communication technologies. This avoidance looks to be a systematic one in both the major initiatives to study the intercession of Islam and media from the institutional vantage point of media studies, especially when one realizes that much of the sociology of knowledge in Islam can be understood and actualized in its concrete form as a historical expression of a particular kind of modality, its pedagogic practice and the way it produces and transmits knowledge. The present study then argues that in order to understand the conditions of possibilities that religious media affords in a community, one need to develop a narrative that will account for what can be broadly termed as the religious work of media.

Keywords

Community Paradigm, Media Studies, Religious Works of Media, Sociology of Knowledge

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In their editorial note on Muslim media, a first of its kind, in the special volume of the *Journal of Media, Culture and Society*, Philip Schlesinger and Hamid Mowlana (1993) justify their attempt to bring out such a volume by arguing that the changing patterns of communication behaviour amongst Muslim communities is at the centre of the recent changes in the world order. Following this Mowlana (1993) proposes an Islamic community paradigm, as against an information society paradigm, to make sense of communication practices from an Islamic perspective. He deploys a series of Islamic terms to delineate and make a case for this such as *tawhid*, *ummah*, etc. and argues that four elements are fundamental to understanding the Islamic community paradigm; (1) the world view of *tawhid* [which he translates as the unity of God, human beings and the universe], (2) sociology of knowledge in Islam, (3) integration of personality through Sharia [Islamic jurisprudence] and (4) meaning of society and state in Islam or what he calls *ummah*. He also points to sociology of knowledge in Islam as one of the key components of the Islamic community paradigm that will not only help one to make sense of contemporary communication practices from an Islamic perspective but through which the determining characteristics of Muslim communication practices could be understood. But later in the article he argues that the information revolution that underlies the information society paradigm should not be portrayed as a distinct phenomenon in human history nor should it be treated as a distinct one from the Islamic community paradigm.

While constituting a separate working group for studying Islam and media in 1995, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), of which Hamid Mowlana was a founding member, also expressed similar concerns: “to study the universal principles of communication in Islam and the West.”¹⁰ But while delineating the objective of the working group in detail, they stated: “to look at the communication phenomenon with a view to contribute towards mutual understanding and peace with justice, to engage in research and organizational development efforts geared toward strengthening the global societal structures and to contribute to the advancement of research and evaluation in the media and communication related fields from an Islamic point of view.” And the major issues that the group is concerned with, according to their website, includes “Islam, communication and sustainable development; coverage of the American war against Iraq; Islam,

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that by then IAMCR already had a working group formed to study the interaction between religion and media called ‘religion, communication & culture.’ Does it then suggest that interaction between Islam and media cannot be studied in the general framework of religion and media? Much of what is discussed here is taken from <https://iamcr.org/s-wg/working-group/RCC>, and <https://iamcr.org/s-wg/working-group/islam-and-media> accessed on 21 April 2016.

communication, and Muslim countries; and Islam, communication, and the spread of terrorism”.

It is ironic that the initial attempts of both Mowlana and the IAMCR to argue for a distinctive character of Islamic community paradigm as opposed to information society paradigm and to study the universal principles of communication in Islam and the West respectively comes to a standstill as their projects unfold and the focus then becomes one that highlights either the similarities between Islamic and non-Islamic communication practices or the instrumentalist role of media in Muslim societies. Such an irony is of course inevitable when one does not pay enough attention to the details that structures the modalities of knowledge production and dissemination in a given society that direct the course of information/communication technologies or when one tends to ignore the differences between the modalities of knowledge production and circulation in different societies. This avoidance looks to be a systematic one in both the major initiatives to study the intercession of Islam and media from the institutional vantage point of media studies, especially when one realizes that much of the sociology of knowledge in Islam can be understood and actualized in its concrete form as a historical expression of a particular kind of modality, its pedagogic practice and the way it produces and transmits knowledge. The following incident that happened during the initial phase of my fieldwork in Kozhikode, Northern Kerala, helped me to recognize the centrality of these elements in Islamic knowledge practice.

I met Dr. Sheikh Usama al-Sayyid al-Azhari, one of the 50 most influential Muslim personalities in the world according to The Royal Islamic Strategies Studies Centre, Jordan, and who teaches at the Faculty of Usul al-Din and Da'wa [religious foundation and propagation] in the renowned Al-Azhar University, Cairo, in the office of Sheikh Aboobacker Ahmad. The latter is also known as Kanthapuram A. P. Aboobacker Musaliyar, a learned and highly influential Muslim scholar from Malabar. Sheikh Usama travelled all the way from Cairo to Kozhikode to visit scholars in Malabar, to stay with them and read *hadiths* [prophetic traditions] with them in order to obtain *ijaza*, the consent attesting that he has read the prophetic tradition with a master and received permission from them to read it for himself and to transmit it to others with proper *isnad*.¹¹ Sheikh Usama also specifically wanted to visit Abu Muhammad Al Qadiri al Vailathuri al Malaibari, also known as Vailathur Bava Musaliyar, who has written an extensive commentary on *Jam` al-Jawami` fi Usul al-Fiqh* [a compendium of the principles of law written by Taju Din 'Abdul Wahhab Ibn 'Ali As-Subki (d.1370) in 1359 at Nairab near Damascus] and to take *ijaza* from him to read and transmit *Jam` al-Jawami`* and its

¹¹ *Isnad* is a technical term in Islamic tradition for scholarly genealogy and is considered as a proof attesting to the historical authenticity and chain of transmission of a particular text or tradition in Islam.

commentaries.¹²

What was so surprising about this visit to me was the fact that Taju Din 'Abdul Wahhab Ibn 'Ali As-Subki, the author of *Jam` al-Jawami,* also belonged to the same place in Alexandria where Sheikh Usama was born and brought up in. But he travelled all the way from Alexandria to Kozhikode via Cairo to visit a Malabari scholar to get his *ijaza* to read a book written by a 14th century scholar from his (Sheikh Usama's) region. What was equally remarkable was the fact that all the *hadiths* he had read with the scholars in Malabar were already available in thousands of books and was easily accessible to any scholar from Al-Azhar for centuries now. When I had the opportunity to talk to Sheikh Usama, I posed this question: why did he travel all the way from Cairo to Kozhikode to read a book or *hadith* with a Malabar scholar when they were readily available in the libraries in Cairo or on hundreds of online platforms? Foregrounding the link with knowledge, the physical presence of a scholar, and imbibing of knowledge from him orally through companionship in Islam, he said: "knowledge is considered to be the lost property of a Muslim. It is passed unto us from the Prophet through his heirs, honest scholars. Knowledge is transmitted to us and among us through a tradition of inheritance. So, knowledge in Islam becomes true and authentic knowledge only when it is received as an inheritance through an unbroken chain starting from the Prophet. Reading a book and gaining knowledge from it independently is not epistemologically valued in Islamic knowledge practices. So it's always appreciated when knowledge is gleaned from scholars who have studied it from another honest scholar and this chain finally goes back to the Prophet."

Sheikh Usama's later book titled *Buldaniyyath* (2013), a compilation of forty *hadiths* from forty different countries and forty different scholars has a *hadith* he heard from Abu Muhammad Al Qadiri in Malabar, who had heard it from his master Sayed Muhammad bin Qahhar, who heard it from his master Shihabudheen Ahmad Shaliyathi, who heard it from his master Muhammad Muhyudheen Hasan with the chain finally reaching up to Anas bin Malik, who heard the Prophet telling Ubbay ibn Ka'ab (d. 649) (considered the greatest reciter of the Qur'an after the Prophet), the following: "Indeed Allah has commanded me to recite the Qur'an to you." Ubbay asked, 'Allah mentioned my name to you?' 'Yes', the Prophet replied. 'And I have been mentioned by the Lord of The Worlds?' Ubbay asked again. 'Yes.' Prophet replied. Hearing upon

¹² *Jam` al-Jawami* is perhaps the most famous of Imam Subki's many works. It remains up to this day the standard work on Shafi'ite law and is used as a textbook for the study of law at the Islamic University of Cairo. Abu Muhammad Al Qadiri al Vailathuri al Malaibari's commentary on this 14th century text (*Al Alwa al Sawathiu fi Tarqeebi Jam' al Jawami*) is widely used in traditional Muslim centres of learning in Malabar.

this Ubbay's eyes was filled with tears" (pp. 182-185). By the time this particular *hadith* reached Abu Muhammad Al Qadiri of Malabar in 1960 and then Sheikh Usama of Alexandria in 2012, it had travelled across continents, oceans, countries, races and centuries and of course several times back and forth from Medina where the Prophet said this to his companion in the 7th century.

On 6 March 632, while delivering his farewell sermon in the Uranah Valley of Mount Arafat, Prophet Muhammad said to his companions who had gathered there in the thousands to offer their final rites of Islamic pilgrimage called Haj, the following:

"O People, lend me your attentive ear, for I know not whether I shall ever be amongst you again after this year. Therefore, listen carefully to what I am saying. All those who are present to listen to me today shall take my words to those who are absent and those to others again. It may be that the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly. Be my witness, O God, that I have conveyed your message to your people."¹³ Upon completing his Final Sermon thus, near the summit of Arafat, the last revelation from God came down: "...Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessings upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam: total devotion to God..." (Quran 5:3).

This farewell sermon, known as Khutbatu l-Wada, is considered as the culminating point of Muhammad's prophetic mission. Among the many other things the Prophet reminds his companions of and lay out in the form of a blue print for the generations of Muslims to come include the importance of propagating his messages. Thus the Prophet's advice to those who were present to convey his message to those who were absent also marked a new beginning in Islamic history: rise of institutions of teaching and learning. Since then, Muslim scholars, preachers, rulers and leaders alike have started to build infrastructure and employ the skills required for transmitting the Prophet's message to the Muslim public and beyond.

The Prophet's last sermon, both through its form and content, lays out a model for the transmission of his messages for later generations as well. Since the Qur'an, the Holy book of Islam itself means 'to recite,' and introduces the Prophet as an excellent model for those who put their hope in God (33: 21), Muslims consider each word and deed of the Prophet as exemplary. The request made by the Prophet to his companions at the historic sermon 'to lend their

¹³ This is taken from various *hadiths* narrated in Imam Bukhari's (d. 870) *Swahih al Bukhari*, considered as the most authentic source in Islam after the Qur'an. Particularly the *hadiths* no. 1623- 1626 in the chapter titled "The Sermons during the Mina days."

attentive ears' for the transmission of his messages was taken to be an order related to the senses; particularly listening. Though the importance of the faculty of listening in Islam has already been established through various means and mechanisms much before the Prophet's farewell sermon, particularly through the very title of the Holy text (Qur'an, which means recite) and the form it adopts for its revelation, first to the Prophet and then to his companions,¹⁴ the Prophet once again reiterates its centrality in Islamic pedagogic practices in the farewell sermon. This privileging of the faculty of listening, over other sensorial practices, which according to Islamic pedagogy is key to understanding, believing and embodying a thing into practice has not only fashioned both the form and content of institutions of learning in Islam but has also shaped their future destinies. Thus, listening in Islam was not a technique outside the faith, but is considered as a constituent element of faith and revelation-based social practices.

In the phenomenology of perception the difference between seeing and hearing also marks a fundamental difference in orientation of being in the world (Chidester, 1992). They also present human beings' radically different relationships with the world and outside by embodying different ranges of religious discourses. The two dominant perceptual theories called intromission and extramission, engaging with vision and hearing, delineate this difference in detail; while sight is always associated with space, immediacy and continuity, hearing is explained in terms of time and discontinuity. Thus, it is assumed that in hearing, the presence, connection and the continuous bond between the subject and the object of perception disappears (Eifring, 2013).

But in Islam listening is considered to be a medium through which continuity between the subject and object of perception is announced, anchored, produced and maintained. As clearly illustrated in the farewell sermon as well as in the model the Prophet established for the practical transmission of his messages, Islam brought in listening as a central and defining characteristic in its epistemology by developing a mechanism in which voice and listening is mediated through the presence of human bodies. When the Prophet says to his companions in Arafat to listen to him, to lend their ears, and to take his words to those who are absent and to them to take his words to others again until it reaches the last ones, what is being established and maintained is a continuity of a chain of committed Muslims. This guarantees the faithful recording and transmission of a tradition through human voice and its listening (Ware, 2014).

¹⁴ Commenting on the form it adopted, Qur'an in its verses says the following: "Even if We had sent down to you [Prophet] a book inscribed on parchment, and they had touched it with their own hands, the disbelievers would still say, 'This is nothing but blatant sorcery' (6: 7). I take up this point for further discussion in the third chapter.

The Prophet's selection of human voice for *azan*, the call to congregational prayer, as opposed to for example, a Church bell in Christianity or the sound of the horn in Judaism, also illustrates this point.

Writing in the 11th century, a Muslim scholar from Iran, Dhia' ul-Din Abd al-Malik ibn Yusuf al-Juwayni (d.1085), also known as Imam al-Haramayn, the leading Master of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, counts the physical presence of the master and his verbal instruction among the central requisites of knowledge in Islam. George Makdisi (1981) in his analysis of the emergence of educational institutions in Islam and the West also demonstrates that the major difference between institutions of learning in the West and that of Islam is the absence of the Master and his loud reading for/to students in the former. Comparing what al Juwaini has said on Islamic education with what Bernard of Chartres (d. 1130), a French scholar and administrator has said about the pre requisite of learning in the West, Makdisi points out that the silent investigation replaced the presence of the articulating Master in the West. Thus, the physical presence of a Master in Islamic knowledge transmission foregrounds its bond with orality and hearing. This proposes that knowledge does not reside in documents, but in "authentic human beings and their personal connection with one another" often articulated through their voice (Graham, 1993: p. 507).¹⁵ It is in this historical background Ziaudhin Sardar (1993), argues that the idea of communication in Islam is intrinsically related to the concept of *ilm* [knowledge], where the distinction between ones' pursuit of knowledge and its distribution and transmission ceases to exist.

How are these theologically inspired and historically developed pedagogic forms and practices associated with it integrated into and impacting the entry/exit of information and communication technology among Muslim communities? Or what ambitions does communication technology embody in Muslim societies? These questions have rarely figured as a topic of discussion in communication studies. As the two key moments in the effort to institutionalize Islam-media studies concretely exemplify why/how and when media/communication is studied vis-à-vis Islam, it also sheds lights onto the larger institutional concerns that shape modes of inquiries to study Islam-media interactions.

For example, a cursory look at the academic scholarship on Islam and media suggests that the questions and concerns of these studies have largely been confined to: (1), whether the new information and communication order bring (Muslim) communities closer together or atomize their already precarious relationships (Mowlana, 1993), (2), how does the introduction of new

¹⁵ See Michael Cook's (1997) study on opposition against writing tradition in early Islam.

communication technology play an important agentive role in shaping religious discourses in Muslim communities (Billig, 1995; Eickelman, 1996), (3), is religious authority waxing or waning, diversifying or centralizing in the information age? (Hjarvard, 2016; Graf & Petersen, 2009) and (4), how religious elites have overcome autonomous media infrastructures, their institutional apparatuses and the independent consumers they have produced by entrenching their religious authority in new ways (Mandaville, 2001).

Speaking specifically in the context of digital media, the new information technology according to these scholars meant not only a new method for transmitting texts, but also a new idiom for selecting and presenting religious texts to cater to new kinds of Muslim readers and viewers and argue that the non-institutionalized nature of dissemination of religious knowledge and the inherent potential of cyber transmission has necessitated a reconsideration and reconfiguration of existing Muslim networks. However, Burnt (2009) contests this argument and asks whether a Muslim's engagement with the new media reflect the continuum of Muslim understandings located in the non-digital world. But for him, Islam's encounter with cyber environments appears new only in terms of how the media is applied and much of the content still has a basis in classical Islamic traditions and hence only helps in reinforcing existing religious authorities. Ziauddin Sardar (1993) also presents a similar view when he notes that information technology has changed the very manifestations of Islam and that the distributive and decentralized networks offer a different potential for Muslim societies and culture. The attempt then, to study Islam-media intersection has largely been limited either to figuring out a new Muslim consumer vis-à-vis religious authority or to tracing out continuity in religious communication vis-à-vis change in media technologies.¹⁶

Thus Islam and media intercession has always been posed, either as a problem to be explained and solved as we have seen in the above mentioned studies or as a mere question of representation.¹⁷ These works while they focus on the impact of media technology in a given community by highlighting its epistemic value do it at the expense of obscuring the questions on the ontological value of communication technology and the sensibilities it embodies in a society. The remarkable absence of discussions on the form and significance of communication/technologies in the scholarship on Muslim media demonstrates this problem aptly where technologies are understood as

¹⁶ The thesis use the word media, technology or media technology in an expansive sense by converging both the meaning and usage of media technology and communication technology. The distinction between them is challenging because in its everyday use, as we use these terms interchangeably.

¹⁷ Edwards Said's *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts determine how We See the Rest of the World* (2006) is an example.

disembodied entities. The fact is that technologies do not enter a community in vacuum. But a community adopts/adapts information and communication technology as part of the larger infrastructural designing of their community and in relation to their social assemblage in which their religious orientations play a constituent role. As a result, existing impact narratives on media technology are unable to engage with the constituent nature of technologies in Islam and its religious practices. This study then argues that in order to understand the conditions of possibilities that religious media affords in a community, one need to develop a narrative that will account for what can be broadly termed as the religious work of media.

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