

Media Ownership and Islam

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Media is defined as the transmission of information without a doubt, dealing with culture or community¹ and most often involving government and citizens. Media carries shared cultural understandings and social relationships. With the introduction of dramas in the Ancient World, the media came into existence, which was later developed into newspapers around 1612 C.E. Ultimately it was in the 19th century that the newspapers reached mass audience directly.

Media serves the public by educating them about the government, private, corporate and other related issues to the extent that some consider the concentration of media ownership to be a grave threat. Since media is used for advocacy in religion, business and social concerns, enrichment, education and entertainment, therefore, its ownership is a vital issue. Besides, Media and its access is determined by two important and interrelated factors: the pattern of media ownership and the bundle of rights accompanying ownership. In the words of Napoleon Bonaparte, "I fear the newspapers more than a hundred thousand bayonets".²

Media ownership is a delicate matter because media connects an individual to the world thereby plays a crucial role in forming and reflecting public opinion; implants a multitude of cultural influences on the society which often carries a strong and influential message; is responsible for structuring and shaping the religio-cultural lives of the people and comes up with either the good or bad depiction of the people.

In this paper a humble attempt has been made to concentrate on Media Ownership, Pattern and Rights vis-à-vis Islam. In the words of Patrick Hendriks,

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“The main purpose of the framework that will be explicated here is to gain a better understanding of the possibilities of governments to set and pursue political, sociocultural, and economic objectives.”³

Media ownership is a way to control the dissemination of information. It came into existence with the development of newspapers in the early 19th century. The 20th century witnessed a wide range of ownership rules to be strictly followed by the media including ownership of radio and television networks, as well as film studios, publishing houses and more recently internet and other forms of multimedia companies.

The ownership and strategy of media have been a special concern for the policy makers because there are numerous goals to be attained through freedom of expression⁴. The governments are trying a lot to give considerable attention to the means through which they might influence the activities and output of the media. The concern, in turn, has brought with it certain policy measures such as the special tax regulation, subsidies, the allowing of price cartels, and (cross-) ownership regulation. But the primary concept is that of freedom of communication.

Media ownership rules are devoted to determine how news media frames information because it affects the public opinion and is responsible for the interpretation of issues and Media functions as unfolding events brought attention to new issues. In this context it is believed that people want more information than what media provides during the disruption of the crisis⁵. Some people become totally dependent upon the media during crisis so it is important to keep an eye on the reporting⁶. The six functions have been postulated that the media performs during a crisis: 1) warning of predicted or impending disasters; 2) conveying information to officials, relief agencies, and the public; 3) charting the progress of relief and recovery; 4) dramatizing lessons learned for the purpose of future preparedness; 5) taking part in long-term public education

programs; and 6) defining slow-onset problems as crises or disasters.⁷

In the recent years media ownership has gained much attention and has become a highly visible, and highly politicized, communications policy issue. The communication researchers are left with an opportunity to contribute to media ownership policy. Meanwhile, the various political scientists demand the control of dissemination of information to maximize the military and political advantage to the governments. Still the media industry may not be satisfied with the media ownership rules because the industry demands relaxation in rules, which would consolidate them, allow them to compete and preserve and value their struggle.⁸

Media ownership is the term synonymically used with media consolidation. It is used when small conglomerates or corporate houses own the media. These houses are said to view consolidation as detrimental, dangerous, or otherwise problematic only to characterize ownership structure of mass media industries. The importance of media ownership is recognized when media corporates are in a very small number and consequently, number of things follow:

- i) The media is commercialized and sponsors drive the market to which the media shows its loyalty including advertisers and government rather than to the public interest.
- ii) The media entertains fewer opinions and voices of the general public.
- iii) The minorities and others are barred from the open opportunities of making their voice reach the public.
- iv) The commercial media is more concentrating on market-based competition rather than innovation.⁹

The media has created an arena in which groups compete with each other for exposure. Every media channel, newspaper, etc. are affiliated with some organization, government, non-

government and there has been an increase in the advocacy because media performance is another issue to be addressed.

The economists examine the media ownership concentration in terms of its relationship to the ideological content within the society¹⁰. Napoli suggested that there has already occurred some transition and thus recognizes that "Media ownership is much more than an economic issue. This recognition comes after a prolonged period in which policymakers focused primarily on economic policy objectives and, consequently, relied almost exclusively on economic analysis in their decision making in this area"¹¹.

The government is responsible for media ownership rules and policies because it provides conditions for freedom of communication: "offering of a wide range of voices and responding to a wide ranging demand"¹². Questions regarding the nature of media content and the factors affecting its production are becoming more central to media ownership policy, particularly in relation to assessing the diversity importance of different information sources¹³.

Media ownership is a dangerous trend as it decreases the quality and diversity of information. It, of course, puts the information, news and entertainment into a wide range of censorship. This censorship is sometimes due to the pressure from advertisers, sponsors or its parent company. Many a times, reporters are seen with their stories being edited to an extent beyond the recognition because they expose the sponsors or its parent company.¹⁴

In contrary, the primary purpose of the first amendment to the US constitution¹⁵, as per the academicians, was to encourage a free press as political agitator evidenced by the famous quote from US President Thomas Jefferson, "The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to

keep the waters pure”¹⁶.

The origin of freedom of speech and expression has a long history and dates back to the 7th century where evidences prove that freedom of speech was first used, declared and implemented upon by Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and then stressed upon by Caliph Umar (R.A.) in the form of media¹⁷. In the Abbasid Caliphate period also, freedom of speech was declared an important entity by al-Hashimi (a cousin of Caliph al-Ma'mun) in a letter to one of the religious opponents he was attempting to convert through reason¹⁸. According to George Makdisi and Hugh Goddard, “the idea of academic freedom” in universities was “modelled on Islamic custom” as practiced in the medieval *madrasah* system from the 9th century¹⁹.

Even the earliest human rights documents like the British Magna Carta²⁰ of 1215 and The Declaration of the Rights of Man²¹ of 1789, a key document of the French Revolution²² do recognize the freedom of speech and give due importance to it.

The right to freedom of speech is recognized as a human right. Freedom of speech, or the freedom of expression, is recognized in international and regional human rights law²³. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights²⁴ states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers²⁵.

Media provides an opportunity to speak freely without any boundaries or limitations. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression through verbal speech or any other act of imparting information or ideas, do not have any connotation. In the contemporary times, the freedom of speech is expressed through various aspects:

1. The right to seek information and ideas;
2. the right to receive information and ideas;

3. the right to impart information and ideas²⁶.

Noam Chomsky, a renowned linguist and political scientist of the contemporary times says, about it as following:

If you believe in freedom of speech, you believe in freedom of speech for views you don't like. Stalin and Hitler, for example, were dictators in favor of freedom of speech for views they liked only. If you're in favor of freedom of speech, that means you're in favor of freedom of speech precisely for views you despise²⁷.

Media ownership is meant for constitutional or statutory protections pertaining to the media and published materials. With respect to governmental information, any government distinguishes which materials are public or protected from disclosure to the public based on classification of information as sensitive, classified or secret and being otherwise protected from disclosure due to relevance of the information to protecting the national interest. Many governments are also subject to sunshine laws²⁸ or freedom of information legislation that are used to define the ambit of national interest.

An Islamic analysis of the term media made the researcher to explain that the Qur'an has referred to television, video and other modern day instruments with hundred percent accuracy. The Qur'anic terms *lahw al-hadith*²⁹ (Pastime of Discourse) encompasses all these things. It is a known fact that from the first to eighth century of the Islamic era, nobody could even think about the mention of modern day technologies in the Qur'an. In the words of Nazrul Hafiz Nadvi, "Even Shaykh al-Islam ibn Taymiyyah could not imagine the vast meaning of this term"³⁰. In the words of Sulaiman Osho,

There is no doubt that the Islamic principle of information dissemination was used by the early Muslims to promote human civilization in [Baghdad,] Egypt, Iraq and among others, Cordova in Spain. But Western civilization has made the

mass media fall drastically into the pitfall of inaccuracy, sensationalism, promotion of crime and nudity, slanting and manipulation of news, defamation of characters, editorialization and sentimentalism³¹.

There is no doubt that the mass media today is Western in content, orientation and delivery, but it has roots in Muslim civilization. The term magazine, for example, took its name from the Arabic word *majala* or *maghla* which means 'dissemination'. The mass media today represents what the Western civilization stands for.³²

In the Qur'anic reference the scholars divide the media into three branches: Repetition, modernity and reminder, including the constant assessment of the *da'i* (preacher) about its propagation. The two pillars of Truthfulness and Integrity are formed the basis and pattern of media by the Qur'an.³³ Islam lays the foundation of a just mass media. This means that the media must be fair and objective in all the times.³⁴

The Islamic concept of media explains that communication is the basis of human existence. The power of communication has led to create the universe and mankind³⁵. Media is a brain child of communication and is meant to convey the true information to the people in addition to informing, educating, entertaining and interpreting opinions. The attributes of being truthful, honest, accurate, independent and objective are the principles of Islam and the pending directions for media. Thus, media should not be in-line with creation of confusion, chaos and controversy.³⁶

As per the Qur'anic injunctions, the objectives of the media should be to promote love and brotherhood between different groups and sections of humanity. It should always incite harmony among minorities and majorities, airing slogans of friendship to reduce any ethnic, regional, national or religious differences. It should be widely used to confess the mistakes

and work in the broader interests of humanity, full of peace and justice. It must be based on construction rather than destruction. Its aim should be to prohibit the people from evils and call them towards piety and good. The self-respect of the people should be taken full care of.³⁷

The media should be impartial in disseminating the truth and highlight the real issues and problems. The media should strive at the reformation of the individual and building and organization of the healthy society and should not be engaged in trade alone³⁸. The Islamic view of mass media presupposes that the disseminating information should be good, pure and undiluted. As man is the vicegerent (*Kha-li-fah*) of Allah on earth to make the world a better place, he has to be a harbinger of good information for societal good.³⁹ For information has to be informal, Islam prescribes principles of media on the basis of accuracy, honesty, fairness, sincerity and legality.⁴⁰ These principles are meant to act as a guide for the media. In Islam the functions, duties and activities of media should be based on public good, human welfare, unique human dignity and reverences, human freedom and rights.⁴¹ There are certain don'ts as well that Islam has specified as the areas to be avoided by the mass media agencies which include defamation, sensationalism, lying, ambiguities, indecencies, promotion of gambling, alcohol, tobacco and drugs.⁴²

To conclude it is important to remember that politics is not the only agenda that media can deal with, but there are other aspects like delivering news, information and most of all entertainment to the society as well⁴³. The different attitudes, beliefs, and emotions are evoked through media and thus its behaviour should not be less than the perceived reality to promote in the words of Entman "particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described".⁴⁴ One of the threatening episodes in the history of media is seen in the form

of media being looked as a business model. It definitely deals with the financial aspect but at the same time creates confusions due to its being finance-oriented. The developed countries have an upper hand over the media and disseminate the information the way they want. There is no doubt that if the media ownership is executed without any prejudices, favours, discrimination, bias and narrow-mindedness, the world will progress on healthy humanistic lines.

References and Notes

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13. P.M. Napoli. *op. Cit.*, pp. 571-572.
14. Stephen Labaton. "Plan Would Ease Limits on Media Owners". *The New York Times*, 18 Oct 2007.
15. The Constitution of the United States of America is the supreme law of the United States. It is the foundation and source of the

legal authority underlying the existence of the United States of America and the Federal Government of the United States. The United States Constitution was adopted on September 17, 1787, by the Constitutional Convention (or Constitutional Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and later ratified by conventions in each U.S. state in the name of "The People"; it has since been amended twenty-seven times, the first ten amendments being known as the Bill of Rights.

16. Concentration of Media Ownership. *en.wikipedia.org*
17. Marcel A. Boisard, "On the Probable Influence of Islam on Western Public and International Law", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 11:4. 1980, pp. 429–50
18. I. A. Ahmad. "The Rise and Fall of Islamic Science: The Calendar as a Case Study." *Faith and Reason: Convergence and Complementarity*. Al-Akhawayn University. 2002, pp. 51-52.
19. Hugh Goddard. *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2000, p. 100.
20. Magna Carta, also called Magna Carta Libertatum (the Great Charter of Freedoms), is an English legal charter, originally issued in the year 1215. It was written in Latin and is known by its Latin name. The usual English translation of Magna Carta is Great Charter. Magna Carta required King John of England to proclaim certain rights (pertaining to freemen), respect certain legal procedures, and accept that his will could be bound by the law. It explicitly protected certain rights of the King's subjects, whether free or fettered — and implicitly supported what became the writ of habeas corpus, allowing appeal against unlawful imprisonment. Magna Carta was the first document forced onto an English King by a group of his subjects (the barons) in an attempt to limit his powers by law and protect their privileges. It was preceded by the 1100 Charter of Liberties in which King Henry I voluntarily stated that his own powers were under the law.
21. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (French: *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*) is a fundamental document of the French Revolution, defining the individual and collective rights of all the estates of the realm as universal. Influenced by the doctrine of natural rights, the rights of Man are universal: valid at all times and in every place, pertaining to human nature itself. Although it establishes

fundamental rights for French citizens and all men without exception, it addresses neither the status of women nor slavery; despite that, it is a precursor document to international human rights instruments.

22. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/feb/05/religion.news>
23. Andrew Puddephatt. *Freedom of Expression, The Essentials of Human Rights*, Hodder Arnold. 2005, p. 128.
24. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (10 December 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris). The Guinness Book of Records describes the UDHR as the "Most Translated Document" in the world. The Declaration arose directly from the experience of the Second World War and represents the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are respectfully entitled to. It consists of 30 articles which have been elaborated in subsequent international treaties, regional human rights instruments, national constitutions and laws. The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its two Optional Protocols. In 1966 the General Assembly adopted the two detailed Covenants, which complete the International Bill of Human Rights; and in 1976, after the Covenants had been ratified by a sufficient number of individual nations, the Bill took on the force of international law.
25. Mathias Klang, Andrew Murray. *Human Rights in the Digital Age*. Routledge. London: 2005, p. 1.
26. Andrew Puddephatt. *Freedom of Expression, The essentials of Human Rights*, Hodder Arnold. 2005, p. 128.
27. Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, 1992. p. 24.
28. Any and all laws ensuring for openness and transparency in government operations, such as Freedom of information legislation, and open meeting laws.
29. Quran, 39:33; 39:32.
30. Nazrul Hafeez Nadvi. *Western Media and its Impact on Society*. Trans. Nazir Ahmad Zargar. India, Academy of Islamic Research and Publications. Lucknow: 2006, p. 43.
31. Sulaiman Osho. Islamic Concept of Mass Media for the Promotion

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32. Ibid., p. 22.
 33. Nazrul Hafeez Nadvi. *op. cit.*, p. 128.
 34. Sulaiman Osho. *op. cit.*, p. 13; Quran, 5:8.
 35. Ibid., p. 11.
 36. Ibid., pp. 12-13; Quran, 49:6, 49:9-10.
 37. Nazrul Hafeez Nadvi. *op. cit.*, p. 129.
 38. Ibid., pp. 256-257.
 39. Quran, 2:30.
 40. Quran 10:32; 49:6; 60:8; 24:25; 39:2; 4:135; 4:148;
 41. Quran, 3:104; 5:33; 2:179; 17:33; 25:68; 2:216; 24:55; 3:110; 49:11-12; 76:13; 90:10; 91:8; 41:40; 49:13.
 42. Quran, 49:11-12; 104:1; 22:30; 25:72; 4:18-9; 17:36; 23:3-5; 83:1-3; 17:35; 5:93; 2:219.
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