

## WESTERN AND ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION MODEL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON A THEORY APPLICATION

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### Abstract

The theories of communication that have been explored are of western perspectives and origin. There are scholars who argue that communication theories should be developed based on the social, cultural and religious context of the society. Thus, this paper conceptually discusses the issue by comparing and contrast the perspective of communication from Islam and the West. The author has underlined specific arguments for or against the position by citing prominent scholars and specific theories in communication. Finally, a model of Islamic communication is proposed and put into visualization based on the analysis and discussion on fundamental concept of Islamic communication made by a prominent Muslim scholar, Hamid Mowlana.

Keywords: Islamic communication, Communication theory, Communication model

### Abstrak

Sebahagian besar teori komunikasi berasal daripada Barat dan mengikut perpektif Barat. Terdapat beberapa pakar berpendapat teori komunikasi seharusnya dikembangkan mengikut konteks sosial, budaya dan agama sesebuah masyarakat. Justeru itu, artikel ini membincangkan secara konseptual beberapa isu berkait teori komunikasi melalui perbandingan dua perspektif iaitu Barat dan Islam. Penulis juga telah menggariskan beberapa pendapat daripada pakar yang menyokong dan membangkang posisi dua perspektif ini berkaitan teori komunikasi. Akhir sekali, model komunikasi Islam telah dicadangkan oleh penulis dan divisualisasikan melalui

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gambarajah berpandukan analisa dan perbincangan mengenai konsep asas komunikasi Islam yang dibangkitkan oleh par Muslim terkenal, Hamid Mowlana.

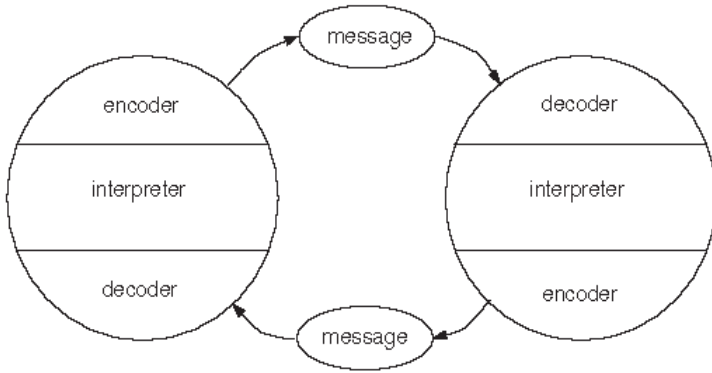
Kata Kunci: Komunikasi Islam, Teori komunikasi, Model komunikasi

## INTRODUCTION

Communication theory existed as an outstanding intellectual topic only in the mid-twentieth century. Its term was first used by electrical engineers in the 1940s with reference to signals in the mathematical analysis (Craig, 2007). It grew rapidly into every intellectual tradition that related to communication. Ideas from various fields like psychology, sociology and others were absorbed into a number of so-called communication theories. At present, there are at least seven distinguished major traditions of communication theory with 'rhetoric' being the oldest (Littlejohn, 2008). According to Baran and Davis (2009), the term communication theory can be addressed to a single theory or also can be utilized in the design of some collective wisdom available in the entire body of communication related theories.

## MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

Many scholars have invented various communication models that have become the basis for the development of communication theories. For example, Wilbur L.Schramm, a well-known scholar in the communication field who has developed a communication model in 1954 that was expanded from Shannon-Weaver transmission model of communication. Unlike Shannon-Weaver's model which proposed only six elements of communication that seems more like a one-way communication model with very less attention paid to the message itself, Schramm focused more on the message as he argued that communication deals with a two-way communication in which the message should go back and forth between the sender and the receiver (Schramm's Model of Communication, n.d). The model stresses on the interchange of role between the sender and receiver as the communicator sends and receives message. The visual of Schramm's model is as the following:



**Figure 1:**  
Schramm's feedback loop (Schramm's Model of Communication, n.d)

Following Schramm's model are Berlo's Model of Communication and The McCroskey Model of Communication. These two models seem to be the improved version of communication model developed by Schramm. Berlo's model stresses on source, message, channel and receiver. The source should possess several elements such as skill, attitude, knowledge and others in sending message to the receiver. While the message in this model contains several other elements that makes the message delivered correctly to the right receiver. The channel in this model consists of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Finally, the receiver should also possess the same elements that the sender has as the role is interchangeable (Whitaker, Ramsey & Smith, 2012).

The McCroskey Model of Communication is considered as the most complete model by communication scholars (Whitaker, Ramsey & Smith, 2012). In Mc Croskey's model, the communication process involves the source (who encodes the message after going through investigation and encoding process), channel (in which the message is travelling from the source to the receiver and with presence of various types of noise) and receiver (who gets the message from the source using a decoding process and moving towards communication effects).

The development of communication models has also witnessed the transition from interpersonal to mediated communication model. In 1957, scholars in the field of journalism Bruce Westley (1915-1990) and Malcolm S. MacLean Jr (1913-2001) proposed new model namely Westley and MacLean's model of communication. This model that portrays two contexts, interpersonal and mass communication stresses the difference between the two, which is feedback. In interpersonal, the feedback is direct and fast while in the mass, the feedback is indirect and slow. Thus, this model believes that communication does not begin when a person starts to talk, but rather when he/she responds selectively to his/her physical surroundings. It considers a strong relationship between response from surroundings and the process of communication. Communication begins only when a person receives message from surroundings. Each receiver responds to the message he/she receives based on his/her object of orientation (Whitaker, Ramsey & Smith, 2012).

In short, communication models from the western perspective as displayed above pay attention on mostly the communication process itself that goes around between the sender and receiver. Names like Schramm, Berlo, McCroskey, and Westley are very prominent in the development of communication within the sphere of western context.

## **ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION VS WESTERN COMMUNICATION**

Based on the above models of communication, theories were developed and are now still expanding in the field of communication. Although these models are widely accepted by most communication scholars as guidelines in developing new theories in communication field either human or mass communication, there are many loopholes identified should we look from the Islamic perspective of communication. In other words, these western approaches of communication underestimate the societal function of communication and ignore the role of social structure and culture. Instead, some of the approaches in mass communication like the one developed by Harold Laswell, outline explicit emphasis on individuals. In Laswell's model, he envisaged the act of communication in terms

of the response to the following five questions: “*who* says *what* to *whom* through *what* channel and with *what* effect?” (Littlejohn, 2008. P: 34). This positivistic and functional Western perspective on communication does not treat communication as an act of social process as comprehensive as drawn by Islamic scholars and most importantly, the absence in the element of *tawhid* (the concept of Oneness towards God) is obviously undeniable (Ali, 1996).

In the perspective of Islam, communication is in fact a divine concept with humans being the finest creature created by Allah SWT blessed with the brain and all the five senses and a single unifying factor is communication (Ghani, 2009). Communication in Islam does not stress out on individualistic approach per se, yet the societal approach at large is also pinpointed. Thus, Islam proposes a comprehensive model of communication which puts every communicator aware of the existence of Allah SWT as the sole creator of the world and aware of social function of communication at large known as *ummah*. Furthermore, with the holy Quran and prophet’s traditions as reference, Islam always stresses on the word *akhlak* or ethics as a vital element in communication which is distinctively lacking in any western communication models (Mowlana, 2007).

According to Mowlana (2007), historically, it was Ibn Khaldun, the father of Islamic Sociology, who theorized about communication as a social institution which grew according to the need of the community. Ibn Khaldun was the first thinker to point out that communication based on *akhlak* or ethics is the web of human society and that the flow of such communication determines the direction and the pace of dynamic social development. He also added that propagation cannot be materialized without group feeling (Hamid Mowlana, 2007). Obviously, the model of communication proposed by Ibn Khaldun far back in the 1337 as highlighted by Mowlana (2007) offers a clearer and more comprehensive visual of what a communication model should be.

## FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION

There are a number of fundamental concepts in Islamic communication as outlined by Hamid Mowlana (2007) that need to be taken into a serious consideration by Muslim communication scholars and researchers. The first concept is the theory of *Tawhid*. It implies the unity, coherence and harmony between all parts of universe. It describes the rightness of “exclusive servitude” to Allah SWT and rejects any other forms of sovereignty except Allah SWT. Hamid Mowlana (2007) further argued that should this concept is applied in human communication, it will give the principal guide in “drawing the boundaries of political, social, and cultural legitimation by a given communication system”. This concept of *Tawhid* is much needed to be practiced by all Muslim communicators as it functions against the material foundations such as a desire for wealth which must not be stressed by communication practitioners but *Tawhid* teaches us to work for Allah SWT alone.

The second concept proposed by Hamid Mowlana (2007) is the doctrine of responsibility, guidance and action. It is the doctrine of *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nayh 'anil munkar* or the commanding to the right and prohibiting for the wrongdoings. It gives the notion of individual and group responsibility for preparing the succeeding generation to accept the Islamic precepts and make us use of them. This is because Muslims have the responsibility of guiding one another and each generation has the responsibility of guiding the next. In short, Islamic communication as opposed to western approach, places communication in a bigger and greater position in which it is not merely a communication, but within the act of communication, there is a responsibility carried out by both Muslim individual and community at large as obligation in communication.

Both the first and second concepts are obviously missing in any of communication models proposed by Western communication scholars. Western communication models never place *tawhidic* element as the most important factor leading to good communication. These concepts that are lacking in Western communication models have led to the destructive in moral values of an individual thus putting away ethical concept of human communication. In contrast,

Islam stresses the significant of *Tawhid* as the major element in either human or mass communications (Hamid Mowlana, 2007).

The next concept highlighted by Hamid Mowlana (2007) in Islamic communication is the concept of community. It refers to the ummah, that is the larger Islamic community that goes beyond national borders and political boundaries as well as racism. An Islamic community in a real sense exists only when it is nourished and governed by Islam. Moral values follow piety and the social system of Islam is based on justice, equality, and people's rights. Referring this to communication context, the community that follows closely the Islamic principles would lead to a good community.

The fourth concept is the principle of *Taqwa* or fear of Allah SWT. It is basically translated as piety, referring to individual's fear of Allah SWT. It is the individual, spiritual, moral, ethical and psychological capacity to raise oneself to that higher level, which makes a person almost immune from the excessive material desires of the world. According to Hasim (2009), it is a virtue and as important element in the ethical framework of Islamic communication both at the individual and community levels. For example, in the context of journalism, if one journalist does not possess *taqwa*, he tends to provide false news to the public and this is what we can see nowadays in the world of journalism where not all news are covered based on reliable and valid source, in fact some are merely false coverage.

The final fundamental concept of Islamic communication is the concept of *Amanah* or translated as trustworthiness. It signifies great responsibility which Allah SWT has imposed on the human being for his or her deeds in this world. Mowlana (2007) claimed that its one important aspect is that it can only be given to the one who has the capability and spiritual strengths to shoulder the burden of its responsibilities and fulfill the commandments of Allah SWT. The most relevant view of this concept as it may apply to the conduct of communication within the Islamic sphere is that *Amanah* refers to divine vicegerency (Ali, 1996). For instance, in interpersonal communication, a person who is *Amanah* is the one who can be trusted by others. He or she usually is a leader in small group communication and holds a responsibility to keep any secrets within

the group or among other groups. It may also be noted that rights and obligations are interdependent. Another example, if we want to apply this concept into media context, serving the public interest, therefore becomes one of the principal ethical duties of the media (Basir, Haron, & Musa, 2009).

**ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION MODEL**

Based on the above analysis and discussion on fundamental concepts of Islamic communication as outlined by Mowlana (2007) and supported by a number of researchers, the concept of Islamic communication can be visualized into an Islamic communication model as opposed to the ones developed by western communication scholars:

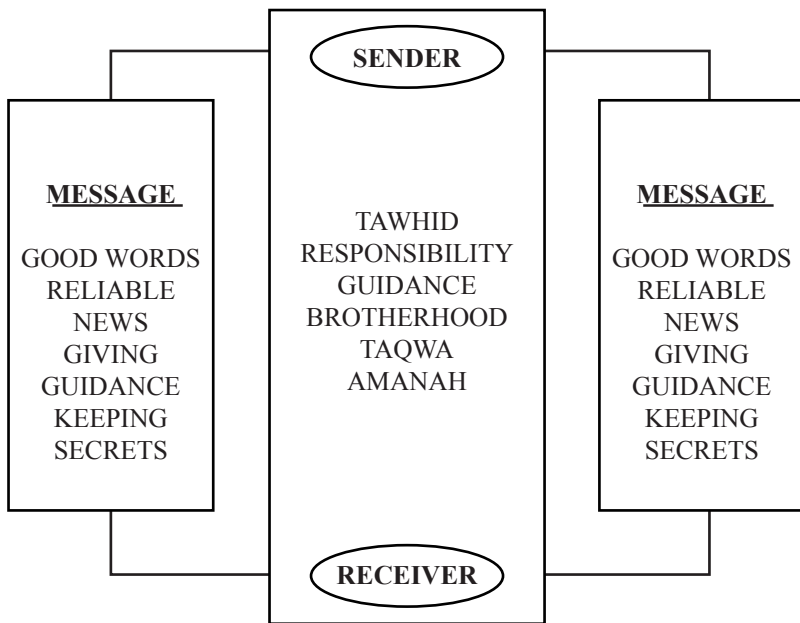


Figure 2:  
 Visualization of Islamic Communication Model—based on the fundamental concepts of Islamic communication proposed by Hamid Mowlana (2007)



Referring to the model in figure 2 above, it is very obvious that there is a distinct difference from the models developed by western communication scholars like Wilber Schramm, James McCroskey and others (Whitaker, Ramsey & Smith, 2012) in terms of the elements of message as well as the personality of the sender and receiver. The western models do not emphasize on 'what' kind of message but only on 'how' to encode and decode the message (Littlejohn, 2008). While in Islamic perspective, the message that is delivered or received must be well monitored in terms of its reliability and choice of words. The message should not possess elements that are misleading in human's judgment and it should be kept within the sender's and receiver's own secrets (Khiabany, 2007). While unlike the western models that highlight only on the ability of both sender and receiver in interpreting the message or decoding process, the Islamic model stresses on the personality of both the sender and the receiver who should follow the right teachings of Islam based on the holy Quran and prophet's traditions as the reference in life. They are expected to be a person with good qualities as described in the model (Mowlana, 2007).

Furthermore, Islamic communication model as proposed by Mowlana (2007) has shown the existence of *Tawhidic* element in which every individual is aware of the existence and the Oneness of Allah SWT. This awareness has led an individual to a situation whereby he or she will be conscious of every word uttered as to ensure no actions that lead them to be sinful. This results to the existence of other elements such as responsibility of what is going to be uttered, fear of Allah (*Taqwa*) and honesty.

## **WESTERN COMMUNICATION THEORIES VS ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION THEORIES**

It appears that the existing communication theories developed by western communication researchers are bias against other cultures especially Islamic culture. It has increased concern among Muslim communication researchers like Hamid Mowlana and others who have opened the way for some significant and highly needed comparative analysis (Khiabany, 2003). The writer believes that western communication theories, especially the ones related to media

usage need much attention in adaptation with Islamic perspectives for the application within Muslim society worldwide. Thus, the writer's following arguments will only put a focus on western media theories as comparison to Islam.

Media theories play a big role in developing a society. They act as socializing agent in society and this role is significantly important. This is due to the fact that media contribute to various impact in the process of changing social lifestyle (Basir et. al, 2009). The media messages are able to influence individuals and shape social behaviour which leads to major attention paid by the media authorities in developing certain expected perceptions in society. Some scholars claim that media are able to produce either positive or negative impact as they wish to the society (Barran & Davis, 2009; Littlejohn, 2008; Ghani, 2000) For example, research done on media and youths show big impact that the media have in influencing the youths (Barran & Davis, 2009; Littlejohn, 2008; Hopkinson, 2003; Bahari, 1998).

This discussion will put a focus on one media theory developed by Western media theorists like Mellvin De Fleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach (1975) who described on Media System Dependency Theory. They argue that in this theory, the more "a person depends on having needs gratified by media use, the more important the media's role will be in person's life" (p: 273). Thus, this clearly signifies that media, regardless of which type, have a very strong influence on individual's life. Since the media's coverage is seen able to influence audience or readers, Basir et.al (2009) argued that the media are then believed to have a power in shaping public opinion on certain issues and to some extent, the media are seen to have a big impact in making the public to rely and trust on news portrayed.

The above theory is also supported with another argument made by Paul F. Lazarfeld and Robert K. Merton (in Barran & Davis, 2009) who stated that some society feel that media are effective tools in influencing them both positively and negatively and should there is no monitoring, the negative impact would dominate. However, what the western media theories such as De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach's media system dependency theory provide is only the indication of the media power towards society at large, the drawback of this

theory is that the theorists themselves fail to provide both the society and media practitioners with proper guidelines on how to avoid from disseminating and receiving negative message as an addition to the theory. Therefore, to counter with such issue in media usage among Muslim users, the adaptation of Islamic perspective into the western media theories is needed.

Haron (2009) argued that the media usage must be based on the Islamic principle of *al-amru bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (the commanding to the right and prohibiting for the wrongdoings). This principle is a benchmark towards the role of media in ensuring the conservation of five major elements in *syariat al Islamiyyah* (Islamic principles) which are the conservation towards Islam, mind, generation, soul and wealth. To clarify further, it means that the role of media from Islamic perspective should be parallel to the context of Islamic principles. In other words, the role should be seen from the approach of not only social development, but also social responsibility which covers responsibility of media practitioners in providing only valid and reliable news, avoiding message dissemination that is misleading, giving opportunity to public expressing their views and many others which obviously not in the practice of western media culture (Basir et.al, 2009).

In this context, what is lacking in most western media theories is the absence of genuine reference as the ultimate guidance in all aspects. The advantage that Islam has over the west is the holy Quran and prophet's traditions as the major sources of reference in various aspects of life including in the field of media and communication theories. These two divine sources of reference play a role in providing good messages in which the positive impact of these messages can be distinctively seen. Allah SWT through the holy Quran and the prophet Muhammad PBUH through his traditions teach Muslims to observe good *akhlak* or ethics and Muslim media practitioners and researchers are at no exception.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, media and communication theories are not only important in conducting research for social change, but also very significant in providing transparent guidelines for authorities, practitioners and organisations in developing a harmonious society. Within the Islamic and Muslim context, the theories need to be adapted following the Islamic teachings as to prepare the society with proper guidance in facing the challenging world that already set by the West which full with biases against Islamic culture.

It is then argued by Yousif (2002) that one of the best means to counter against this bias is for Muslims to develop their own independent communication and media capacity based on their own communication and media theories as to reduce their dependence on western theories which open to various doubts and lead to many drawbacks, especially with regards to social spiritual development.

The application of Islamic principles in the modern communication theories would lead to the development of another field of subject, that is, principles of Islamic tolerance. As Islamic communication model highlights on the concepts of responsibility, this would produce an individual with good moral values having sense of tolerance in communication aspects (Syed & Faisal, 1996). The lacking that exists in western communication model should be substituted by islamic communication model

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