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Communication Theory: The Islamic Perspective

By

R Djajusman Tanudikusumah
COMMUNICATION THEORY:
THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

by

R. DJAJUSMAN TANUDIKUSUMAH


(R. Djajusman Tanudikusumah is Doctor in the Communication Sciences and is currently Professor in the Philosophy of Communication at the Department of Communication Sciences of the Social and of the Political Sciences of the University of Indonesia, Jakarta)
There was a time, as far back as in the fifties, that I had to run for a class of Sociology. At the same time, it was also my first entry as a student. I figured being a student at the University was very important. Because there would be interesting lectures, smart professors, beautiful classmates, and the like. Moreover, as many scholars convinced me, there would be new horizons, original concepts and inventions, at any rate, everything would be different than the life at the High School. The period behind a student was a period of logarithmic life, the teacher of the high School was the law.

So I entered the class, full of stories from every corner filling up my ears, my eyes and moreover my mind. For a small period I felt something like many ants at my back, the ants were throwing around something like powder, which made you itching, especially on my neck. The powder of inferiority feeling!

My naivety by believing such instigations made me first enchanted of everything the lecturer told the class. Some of his passages were the following:

For having a portrait of a social change, Sociology had a very original construction. Especially a portrait concerning Indonesia in transition.

The 'original construction' the lecturer had in mind, proved to be the construction as presented by Wertheim in his book called Indonesian Society in Transition. It was a 'story' of a sleeping Javanese peasant (not a sleeping Snowwhite!), the Cinderella of his drama.
He was writing further: "If a Javanese peasant, who had fallen asleep in 1600, were to awaken today, he would find a good deal to gape at. Even before seeing one of the occasional motorcars visiting his desa (village, RUT) or hearing an airplane high in the skies, he would have a deadly fright at seeing the numerous bicycles traversing the main desa road. The outward appearance of many huts might look rather familiar, but the larger brick houses covered with tiled roofs, the desa school and the clinic would be a novel. So would the medicines or injections administered to the patients. Though the interior of most houses is still extremely sober, the use of majority of the objects found there would probably be unknown to him.

So would the photographs and pictures pricked on the walls of some houses, the empty tins pasted over with coloured brands used for various purposes, and the papers mostly utilised as packing paper. Neither would clothes have a familiar look, as he used to wear coarse home made luriks, whereas at present most peasant wear manufactured and printed imitation batiks or other cotton prints. The rice fields might remind him of his own times, and even some of the tools such as the rice knife (umu-umu) and the hoe, might have a familiar look,

but the two other main crops, cassava and maize, would be quite unknown to him. Nor would he remember over having drunk the coffee offered him by his descendants. He would even hardly be able to understand their speech, and their manners towards elders (and perhaps even the topics of their talks) would seriously upset him, especially if they were to discuss their experiences at nearby town or plantation.

The importance of money in village economy would be new to him, but some of the institutions, such as mutual help, slamatans (religious feasts), wayang (shadow play) performances and magic practices in connection with birth and death might still remember him of former times.

Almost certainly he would not agree that rural life had remained unchanged throughout three and half centuries (Wertheim, 1956).

When I left the class, I really got disappointed. All those instigations people pumped in at my head all along, I pushed away abruptly. I was not enchanted any more, nor do I have any respect for such a construction since then up to this day.

The point is, as I can tell you right now, the construction or at least a sleeping case is not new nor original. On the contrary, it had since long existed.
As the Chapter of Kahf or the story of the Companions of the Cave (Ash- Habul Kahfi) or Sura XVIII of The Holy Qur'an stated that they fell asleep, and remained asleep for some generations or centuries. When the wall which sealed up the cave was being demolished, the youths awoke. They still thought of the world in which they had previously lived. They had no idea of the duration of time. But when one of them went to the town to purchase provisions, he found that the whole world had changed. Further, his dress and speech, and the money which he brought, seemed to belong to another world.

I have no intentions to analyse more how long they stayed in the cave (there were many interpretations of the duration, from 200 up to 300 years and some additional years), but the Holy Qur'an injunction was: "Say, God knows best how long they stayed" (S XVIII, 26). The more important in my paper is to show the parable, to which the construction of Wertheim concerning the sleeping Javanese peasant was running closely, and somehow isomorphic (same in pattern) and therefore not original (for me).

I put this case to the fore, in the framework of communication as if I heard again Dr. Schramm sounding: when there is a change, there communication flows. How does it work actually?

By the time Indonesia began to embark a five year development planning cumulatively, Dr. Emil Salim as a columnist of a daily student newspaper KAMI at Jakarta, while he himself is now a professor in Economics, storied in the same breath of a sleeping Javanese peasant. But different than the sleeping peasant ala Wertheim, his sequences were more 'advanced': While the man was sleeping, the workers were working, building something, the voice of a bulldozer, the ringing of an iron plant, a steel cable in the setting, all those will never make the peasant sleeping vast anymore...

If we are now to consider a little bit further the 'years' or the 'time' tunnel, this same peasant is sleeping on through and later on awakens confirmatively, the question arises:

Within the era of communication revolution, the more within the era of information, where 'wired society' or 'computerised society' or even communication century ahead is blowing up everywhere, how do the existing communication theories stand especially in the perspective of Islam?
THE EXISTING THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION:

In this regard, I would like to discuss further the following topics respectively:

1. The general model of communication made by Gerbner;
2. The Gerbner model as further explored by Stappers;
3. Both models mentioned at 1 and 2 as viewed in the perspective of Islam, especially in the development of Indonesia.

I mentioned this model of Gerbner surely not without reason. Gerbner was not only my ex-teacher, but also a Professor in Communication and currently Dean of The Annenberg School of Communications. Very characteristics inherent to his model was the definition as its basis, which formed the protagonist of the whole picture.

The statement as I have to learn by heart every day or to pronounce as loudly as I can every morning when I wake up from my sleep (fortunately not as a Javanese peasant) runs as follows:

Communication is social interaction performed through messages.

And by messages he meant formally coded symbolic or representational patterns of some shared significance in a culture.

While the culture itself, as he regarded, is a system in which messages cultivate and regulate the relations between people.

Further, he also mentioned, that in its broadest 'humanizing' sense, communication, then, is a source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. It is the production, perception, and grasp of messages bearing man's notion of what is, what is important, what is right, and what goes with what (Gerbner, 1976).

Again, when I studied his writings, or any time I was present at his class many years ago, I couldn't erase my memories of the past when I was a child and trained by way of a religion teacher. Facing the Holy Qur'an, he pointed some Chapters to me like the Sura XLI e.g. the Al-Hujarat, which in my eyes (now) forms the initial image of communication. It stated a.o. that it is addressed to all mankind. The mentioned Sura, 13 further referred:

0 mankind! We created You from a single (pair) of a male and a female. - And made you into Nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise Each other).
Verily - The most honoured of you - in the sight of God -
Is (he who is) the most - Righteous of you. - And God has
full knowledge - And is well acquainted - (With all things).

As it is, mankind is descended from one pair of parents.
Their tribes, races, and nations are convenient labels by
which we may know certain differing characteristics.

Within those dimensions, I think, The United Nations Organ­
ization is the biggest international forum we have now for
practising communication purposes. It is even the biggest
pity however, that such an international stage has not reached yet
its main purpose, e.g. to create an everlasting peace in the
world we live in. On the contrary, in the breath of communicat­
ion as stated in the Al-Hujurat, before God, despite the
different characteristics of the nations, they are all one,
and he gets most honour who is most righteous. This is
implicitly THE MESSAGE as the truly representational pattern
of THE SIGNIFICANCE that must be commonly shared.

On the other hand, Stappers (1966, 1984) analysed very accurately
the model of Gerbner.
If Gerbner is a kind of representative from the United States,
especially as regard to communication theorizing, Stappers is
more a representative from the West. A Dutch scholar of origin,
he studied Publizistik - wissenschaft with great interest and
later on made a dissertation concerning a connection between
the predominantly american literature on "Mass Communication"
and the german literature on "publicistics".

From the existing models he studied, such as discrete models
(e.g. Berlo’s SMCR- model), flow- models (e.g. the models of
Riley and Riley, Shannon, Schramm, and Maletzke), AMX- models
(e.g. the models of Newcomb, and Westley and Maclean) and
Research classifications (e.g. the Iasswell formula and Gerbner’s
model), he stated that the Gerbner model is the most suitable.
As Stappers stated further, he has proposed an adaptation that
would enable him to include in this model certain data which
receive greater emphasis in other models.
The most interesting adaptation as Stappers did in his study toward the Gerbner's model was the following:

When Gerbner constructed the communicating agent or agency e.g. Man or Machine engaged in an exchange with events of his world, Stappers incorporated five small bulbs within the big circle of Gerbner's graphic model, consisting of informing subagents. Their respective functions were substantively:

1. decoding the information process by way of reaction as a new reaction, done by the most right circle;
2. defining what will happen further in the communicating agent on the basis of the information this agency possesses all along; done by way of the circle placed at the top;
3. the relation of the agency to something out of it, as a sum of 1 and 2; done by the circle right in the middle;
4. The information possessed by the agency concerning other agencies, to which the agency will relate; the most left circle;
5. the sum of 3 and 5, concerning the information, the agency would like to offer to other agencies (the encoding process); done by way of the circle most below.

By way of adaptation process, Stappers actually made a shift from Gerbner's communicating agency to informing agency.

However, the initial model of Gerbner was that of constructing messages as communication event or statement of event. While information was only meant for making other agencies informed or making someone else came to know.

Then, communicating also included transforming someone by way of an influence, while informing was only to make the other agency remain in its status but getting more knowledge than before.

Lastly, a statement of event was to form a new world as it was usually called the camera reality, while information did not create a new reality but remained in its dimension, the real world.

Now, in my opinion, as far as my old memories can follow, that of Gerbner (the graphic model) is closer to the set up of The Holy Qur'an, since the content of it as we can read at Sura XCVII, 1, runs as follows:

We have indeed revealed
This (Message)
In the Night of Power

(At Yathrib, or The Night of Power (or Honour))
This special night, as we use to call it every time we remembered and honoured in Indonesia, was and is known as Lailatul Qadr.

In this era of development, more technically coined as the 4-th Five Year Planning of Indonesia, we are witnessing also the development of messages throughout the country like Family Planning for getting more and more acceptors, anticipating the take-off period to industrialisation era and many others.

Communication with messages is like air to the lungs, while information is like a system of the nerves. I heard many times that a ring did not constitute the marriage, because marriage (husband and wife relationship) went far beyond that. This relationship of long duration was a communication type of intensive and consistent planning and development. Putting the ring in the fingers at the moment of the wedding is to inform people, that a couple are going to face and entering a new life.

While the marriage itself, The Holy Qur'an had been stating earlier as we can read at Sura XXXVI, 36 (Ya-Sin):

Glory to God, Who created

In Pairs all things

Many interpretations showed, that it was a message about the basic source of marriage.

In a developing country like Indonesia, the performing of messages played and play a very important role. The message as inherent to communication was and is a guide for the people who are heading toward their end, e.g. a society which is prosperous and full of justice, physically and spiritually. The information is the light or electric lamp on the highway at which the Indonesian Nation exist and march as a pilgrim.

As a Nation, we have a State Ideology, THE PANCASILA as a way of life. The religions we have here are its supporting source and the inspiring message in relation to devote yourself to the service of God, including the ISLAM.
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