

# Islam and Information: Need, Feasibility and Limitations of An Independent Islamic News Agency

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## I. INDEPENDENT NEWS AGENCIES

Four major international news agencies—Associated Press, Reuters, United Press and Agence France Presse—gather and distribute much if not most of the international news (be it “hard,” breaking news or “soft” news features) published and broadcast in the world.<sup>1</sup>

They transmit in English and French as well as a number of commercially significant and logistically easy regional languages. (A.P. transmits a daily service in English, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Swedish and offers an Arabic features service by mail. Reuters and AFP offer a daily news file in Arabic.) Most of this news is now transmitted point-to-point either by landline, microwave link, satellite or some combination of these methods which have largely replaced radio wireless transmission over the past ten years. The new technology is much more effective; much less subject to failure and climatic interference but much more expensive. Point-to-point telex is also sometimes used as a fall back position where radio wireless transmission is still in use.

The Associated Press, as an example, has 8,500 subscribers in 150 coun-

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent review of the extensive literature surveying the origin and use of international news is to be found in Sreberny-Mohammadi, “The Word of News Study” — Results of International Cooperation,” *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1984.

tries outside of the United States for its World Service.<sup>2</sup> But the extent that Big Four news dominates international news is much greater than the number of subscribers would indicate, since many national news agencies subscribe to one or more of the Big Four services and then edit and re-transmit the material as part of their own news service to hundreds or even thousands of local news outlets; e. g. Tass—which subscribes to the Associated Press service—has approximately 6,000 subscribers in the Soviet Union.

As the number of full-time foreign correspondents for newspapers continues to decline due to increasing costs and as mass media has proliferated throughout the Third World over the past few decades, the Big Four and other news agencies have expanded in size.

A number of smaller national news agencies not only directly gather news abroad for their national subscribers but distribute news internationally as well. DPA—the West German news agency, EFE—the Spanish agency, and ANSA—the Italian agency offer what in Western professional terms is considered a credible product, but the quantity of their product is so limited that except for an unusual multi-cultural news center such as Buenos Aires (with strong German and Italian press traditions within the national press) their product is usually ignored or overwhelmed by Big Four news.

Most state owned or semi-official national news agencies distribute in some manner internationally, as well as news-gather. Highly politicized national news agency reports will frequently be quoted as semi-official comment on an international news event if the position or view of the national agency's government is relevant to the story but will rarely be used (outside of the closest of allies) by anyone as a news report.

But even when Western professional standards of independence and objectivity (which equal credibility) are met, the services inevitably reflect local priorities in reporting from abroad, particularly since the national news agency can rely, as a subscriber, on the Big Four's broader coverage. The provincial focus limits the appeal of such services to other than local subscribers.

This is of course a major factor that reduces the appeal of periodic Third World and "New Information Order" efforts to provide alternative international news coverage to that of the Big Four. Invariably, limited funding and political sensitivities determine that "alternative" coverage is pooled material taken from existing semi-official national news agency files and as a pool service, suffering from the same limitations and lack of competitiveness as the original material.

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<sup>2</sup> I have used Associated Press as an example of the Big Four since I am more familiar with its operation and staff. Information on AP in this paper is based on extensive "background only" discussions with leading AP executives, news managers and editors involved in the gathering and distribution of foreign news.

The Non-Aligned Pool, the Organization of Asian News Agencies (OANA), and the Pan African News Agency (PANA) more or less come under this category and while they may be of some regional interest none are competitive in the international news arena sense of the word.

Of particular interest for this paper is one of the most recent efforts along these lines—the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) which is headquartered in Jeddah and is associated by charter to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>3</sup>

The IINA is governed by a general assembly consisting of representatives of the national news agencies of the OIC member states, or, where, news agencies do not exist, by government designated representatives. The General Assembly in turn elects from its membership an Executive Board. The Secretary General of the OIC serves as an ex-officio member of this board.

Seven years of planning and outside studies were complicated by the need to scale back to a significantly more modest operation when it became clear that funding would not be forthcoming for the original \$35 million dollar proposal to establish modern telecommunication facilities for reception and transmission. The service began to operate in May 1979.

Over the past five years IINA has grown significantly from what was originally a service monitoring only some of the OIC's member state agencies' news casts and generating from those sources a daily news cast of its own of 2,000 words for each of its two (English and Arabic) files.

The IINA now monitors all available news casts by OIC affiliated national news agencies. Stringers (free lance correspondents working part time or per piece) have been secured in the capitals of a number of Muslim countries (usually established staff correspondents of the more professional national news agencies) as well as in some major news centers such as New York. And the agency has begun to independently cover major Islamic conferences and seminars, particularly if they relate to OIC activities or are held in Saudi Arabia.

OIC member state news agencies are using an increasing number of credited IINA items in their own domestic files to local media. In December 1982 IINA established 24 hour duplex satellite links with the Indonesian news agency ANTARA and the Malaysian news agency BERNAMA, which replaced the three-hour per day news cast via IINA radio transmitter. The use of the satellite link has "tremendously enhanced newscast in each direction" according to IINA Director General Safdar Ali Qureshi, and has enabled IINA to feed the news agencies which are accessible on the Organization of Asian News Agencies

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<sup>3</sup> Data on IINA based on private conversations and correspondence with IINA Director General Safdar Ali Qureshi and members of his staff.

network and vice-versa. IINA strategy is to seek similar satellite cost-sharing arrangements with other OIC member countries to improve and expand two-way reception.

An IINA daily news feed now numbers approximately 7,500 words and consists of anywhere from 35 to 45 items. Its full time staff (all of whom appear to be located in Jeddah) totals 26 and its annual budget is about 2 million dollars.

In comparison, the Associated Press (excluding entirely its vast domestic American news gathering and distribution operation and management—an operation that takes three-quarters of the overall A.P. Budget) maintains 76 foreign bureaus with 400 full time newsmen (of whom only 85 are American nationals) with an estimated budget of 40 million dollars. If in our calculations the United States were to be covered and serviced hypothetically along the lines commensurate with other major news centers in the world service, rather than by the far more intensive AP domestic service (132 bureaus and a legion of stringers) its budget would probably be in the neighborhood of 50 million dollars at the very minimum.

AP files a basic World News service cast that fluctuates between 51,000 to 112,000 words a day and between 250 to 600 items daily depending on the amount and importance of breaking news on any given day and the speed of printers used at subscriber points (which vary from 400 words per minute to 66 words per minute.)

Attached to this paper are two randomly chosen sample IINA wire copy casts in English and Arabic. Note that the most successful reporting occurs when IINA secures its own coverage of an Islamic Peace Committee meeting in Jeddah. Also note the inability (given national news agency sensitivities and lack of staffing) to provide any of its own coverage of intra-OIC controversies such as reporting from the Iraqi and Iranian battlefronts. Even the most readable, staff-written copy such as the Peace Committee stories lack a depth that can only be secured by providing background and analytical material that has no place in what remains as basically a pooled effort of highly politicized national news agencies.

I would not want to attach too much importance to this point for I believe that even an independent Islamic news agency would face similar limitations. One limitation is most clearly political—breaking news stories that touch upon national sensitivities are not going to appear in most state-controlled media. My own experience in the Middle East, first as a correspondent for *Jeune Afrique* and then as a reporter for the *New York Times* and later *NBC News* suggests that Muslim world state-controlled media will be even less tolerant and more suspicious of breaking news, or investigative journalism with a political or hard news angle that does not confirm or conform to the ruling party line when the reports in question originate from an Islamic or Third World source than from a Western source.

The only Teheran-dated stories that I see in the Egyptian press are rare reports that reflect negatively in some manner on Iran, its ability to successfully pursue the war against Iraq, or its ability to maintain domestic stability and economic growth. I don't have access to the Iranian press but I suspect the same selectivity holds true on the reports dated Baghdad appearing in Iranian newspapers, or in the Syrian press, which supports Iran against Iraq.

The other reason why I do not believe we should attach too much importance to the inability (for political reasons) in IINA to provide competitive breaking news, is that from our perspective as Muslims—from our spiritual perspective, there are inherently unacceptable methods and goals involved in the most dynamic forms of Western journalism—hard news and investigative journalism. I will argue this position in more detail later.

A more significant limitation to IINA coverage, from a Muslim perspective is the *relatively low amount of intrinsically Islamic* news content.

In the July 18, 1984 IINA file there is only one item of specific Islamic content (in the broadest religious-cultural sense) besides the three related reports on the Islamic Peace Committee of the OIC—no. 030 (King Fahd gives one million dollars to the Australian Islamic Council) and one item (no. 035) that is most likely Islamic but not specified as such—Morocco to send 250 of its students to teach Arabic to a number of Islamic Asian countries. (Presumably the instruction will be in classical Arabic, perhaps for the sake of direct instruction in Quran reading, but the story in no way indicates this to be the case.)

It is in this domain—its reliance on the intrinsically secular assumptions and attitudes of nearly all national news agencies in the Muslim world, that IINA performance suffers significantly.

The IINA is moving ahead, steadily if modestly, towards most of the objectives defined at the time of its founding: to foster closer relations among member states; to promote professional contacts and technical cooperation among news agencies of member states and to work for the creation of a full-fledged international news agency with its own regional centers.

But political realities drastically hinder its ability to even define much less “work for the consolidation of the objectives of the Islamic world” or “to work for greater understanding among the Muslim people of their Political, Economic and Social Questions.”

The most poorly served IINA objective is its very first one—“To consolidate and safeguard the rich cultural heritage of Islam.” I would suggest that what is involved here has been largely determined by the breaking news or hard news approach of its service along with an unofficial but apparent “Third World” perspective (which must be, inescapably a secularizing perspective, by virtue of the neo-Marxist origins of the very concept of *tier monde* (or, at least, the neo-Marxist uses).

Whatever mainstream Egyptian, Saudi or Turkish society has in common

with mainstream Thai or Burmese society, it is not a devotion to Islam.

Generally more successful as supplements to Big Four agency coverage are the syndicated news services offered by prestigious newspapers in the West who offer to subscribers access to material—generally backgrounders, serious features, and analytical reporting produced by staff or stringer reporters associated with the newspaper offering the service, but generating material that usually does not appear in the newspaper.

Among English-language newspapers, The New York Times, the Times of London, the Observer, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times offer such services which incidentally help pay for these papers maintaining a strong corps of full time foreign correspondents and overseas stringers in defiance of the overall trend.

But these services are only providing more depth and more intelligence within the same overall Western perspective that shapes and is in part shaped by Big Four wire copy. To offset the limits—both political and qualitative (in the professionalist sense of the word) of 3rd World pool copy and the Western or “North” bias of both Big Four agency and syndication service copy, the Rome-based Inter Press Service (IPS) has attempted to provide “alternative” information that treats “methodically with the South’s problems in the South, and in the North with questions which might have an impact on developing nations.”<sup>4</sup>

IPS is a profit-making cooperative that earns its income by selling its own copy (provided by “independent” Western journalists (to my experience generally left-wing in outlook) and “eminent figures in the Third World.”) and by servicing both national news agencies as a dissemination point for national news agency information and the specific needs of various organizations (i.e. an economic press review for the World Bank). IPS transmits 16,000 words/day basic file offered in six different languages.

IPS does not report breaking news but concentrates on “in-depth analyses of economic, financial and commercial questions.” Its concerns are entirely secular and Muslim societies are treated within an overall Third World perspective. It has also been criticized, unfairly or not, by American journalists and Mass Communication scholars for a left-wing bias.

Equally interesting from an operational point of view are the still more specialized News Feature Services which usually offer more thoughtful or researched news features than those produced by the Big Four. Many of these services come and go—many that survive are partially or entirely subsidized

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- Jacques Decornoy, “The Need for Freedom with Responsibility,” *Guardian-Le Monde Weekly*, Sept. 11, 1983. Decornoy, who is impressed by the IPS operation also provides a sympathetic history of the Non-Aligned Pool discussed earlier and a sympathetic understanding of its problems.

by UNESCO or cultural foundations. *Gemini* provides graphics, *Earthscan* provides news features dealing with urgent ecological-environmental issues.

The most recent entry into this field is *Compass*, which is subsidized by the Agha Khan and which describes itself as "an independently-funded international news agency dedicated to the sensitive and objective coverage of issues that affect primarily the developing nations. It pursues no special interests, be they political, religious or ideological, beyond this avowed objective."<sup>5</sup>

A specialized news feature service such as *Compass* sends out a weekly instead of daily file. *Compass* offers subscribers an average of seven long articles a week. Like the Big Four, *Compass* will charge what it estimates the subscriber can afford—a procedure that takes circulation into large account in calculating rates which for the Associated Press can vary from several thousand dollars a month for clients such as BBC or the huge-circulation Third World publication.

For its incomparatively smaller amount of copy *Compass* will not charge its wealthiest subscriber more than a few hundred dollars a month and will offer its service at considerably lesser amounts to poorer clients. If we consider the three weekly *Compass* files attached to this paper, we will again note the secular Third World perspective. Out of 34 articles only one directly concerns any aspect of Islam—in this case a report on a massive boom in the London art market for traditional Islamic art, an interesting but rather marginal subject, if only one out of 34 articles touches on Islam.

Several articles deal with themes that would lend themselves to consideration of an Islamic perspective, particularly since the portion of the Third World which *Compass* appears to primarily address itself to—Africa, Central Asia-Indian subcontinent, the Middle East—is predominantly Muslim. But any consideration of Islamic values is noticeably absent. A report on U.S. policy towards abortion assumes some sort of 3rd World unanimity on the virtues of abortion—certainly a complex issue for any religious culture including the Islamic. And Nazli Choucri's report on the positive advantages of migration in the Middle East—again an overwhelmingly Muslim experience, is written without any of the references to the problems of migration perceived from a religious perspective—the disruption of family life, rootlessness etc. as well as potentially positive effects of migration on religious revival.

*Compass* differs from I.P.S. in that its Third World orientation is a soft (I am using the word here in an ideological rather than technical journalistic sense) rather than hard perspective. Its reports are more related to ecological, appropriate-technology type of concerns than to the hard world-market data

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<sup>5</sup> Data on *Compass* based on promotional literature and private correspondence and conversations with *Compass*' managing editor, Gerard Loughran.

of North-South relations. And it seeks human interest coverage—social workers, athletes, economists as men of social conscience.

But whether “soft” or “hard,” from the prospective of this paper—the coverage of Islam as religion and culture and the coverage of the Muslim peoples and the societies they form—the specialized news agencies do not present any significant departure from the secular perspective of the Big Four news agencies.

## II. NEED

It is precisely the inadequacy and distorting effect of existing coverage of Islam, of Muslim societies and of current events of great importance to Islam and/or the Muslims that establishes the premise of this paper—the need for an independent Islamic news agency.

What lends urgency to that need are two factors. On the one hand increasingly larger sectors of once traditional Islamic societies are being swept up into print and broadcast mass communication systems that rival and threaten to displace the traditional communication systems within which Islamic values and behavioral patterns were profoundly encoded. Those Muslims who remain as active participants in traditional communication systems—socially relevant sermons, family and craft circles’ oral transmission, the café epic ballad, and the liturgies of *maulid* and *hudra*—have no need of an independent Islamic News agency. They have access to all the news they need in contrast to those of us in this “information-age” who have access to such an extraordinary amount of news we have no intrinsic need of.

Secondly the Muslim world is tragically often at the mercy of the super-powers and their immediate constellations—none of which are Islamic. Some of those constellations—the Soviet, the Chinese, are more or less closed systems and there is little that an independent Islamic news agency can do to influence Communist societies. Western societies are another matter.

A Western public opinion, with its own opinion-making elites does exist and is very much open to influence or manipulation. (One might argue that a working definition of liberal democracy is a society based on free competition to manipulate public opinion by conflicting interest groups.) Again, we must be realistic—the need that must be confronted, or rather can be confronted here is for cultural politics, not *dawa*.

*Dawa* can only employ those vehicles that are direct and personal (and thus verifiable) proofs of the Truth. A modern mass communication can at best be a signal to those who would not otherwise know, and a reminder to those who do, that direct and personal and verifiable proofs of the Truth do exist. As an example, consider the impact of favorable television coverage



of the Haj, or an honest but inspirational newspaper account of Standing at Arafat, upon the non-Muslim and upon the Muslim.

But to return to the inadequacy of existing coverage—the causes of that inadequacy are far more complex than many of us assume, and because they are complex they may in some cases pose as much of a problem for the Big Four. Therefore let us proceed to points *beyond* the most obvious—conscious bias against Islam and the manipulation of Western media by powerful forces hostile to Islam and the Muslims.

A. *Empathy and cultural context*—Without being “pro-Israeli” a Western newsman (who may even be *politically* critical of Israel) lacks any other familiar or viable perspective for viewing the Arab-Islamic world than through an Israeli perspective; which is a less exotic and more familiar one. Up until the 1975-76 Lebanese civil war it was a convention of Western journalism to perceive of Lebanon as an “island of peace in an otherwise violent Arab world.” In fact for those few journalists who did more than treat Beirut as a comfortable watering hole between assignments elsewhere in the region, Lebanon has always been at least as violent, if not the most violent, of all Middle Eastern societies, with its deadly clan feuds, mountaineer traditions and stalking-ground role for rival intelligence agencies. The reason why Lebanon was perceived as an “island of peace” was because in 1967 and 1973 Lebanon did not go to war with Israel as did Israel’s other Arab neighbors. Nor did Lebanon participate in the 1956 Suez War or the 1968-70 war of attrition. From an Israeli perspective, and only from that perspective, Lebanon was an island of peace.

Every Arab or Islamic peace plan or initiative—from the time of the late President Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem (which was certainly well publicized and well received in the West) through the Mecca Resolution, the Fahd Peace Plan and the Fez Peace Plan—calls for the restoration of Arab or “East” Jerusalem to Arab sovereignty. To many Western ears that sounds either bizarre or arcane and when U.S. Secretary of State Schultz warns Congress that moving an American Embassy to Jerusalem would provoke violent reaction the length of the Muslim World, Western media audiences and probably many newsmen do not really comprehend what he is talking about. This is not particularly surprising since the core of that city, the setting for the city’s intense Muslim identity—the Haram el Sherif, with its 50 acres of innumerable Muslim holy sites associated in Islam with the lives of Prophets and saints—Ibrahim, Daoud, Sulayman, Yahya (John), Mariam (Mary), Issa (Jesus) as well as Muhammed—peace and blessing upon them all—is invariably identified in Western newsagency copy as “the Temple Mount” on which are located “two mosques which the Muslims deeply venerate.” This identity is a pro forma one, not part of some insidious media conspiracy but the “pro forma” is defined by the Israeli perspective.

B. *Professional hostility or indifference to religion*—*The Quill*, a monthly

magazine published by the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States recently carried an analysis of the quality of coverage of religion in America.<sup>6</sup> The article criticized the media for doing a very poor job, indeed. Mattingly noted that Americans as a whole spend far more money on organized religious activities than on organized sports (in contrast to Western Europe, the U.S.A. is still a *relatively* religious society), but despite the customary view of the market place as the arbiter of editorial concern, news coverage of religion barely exists when compared to massive U.S. sports coverage.

Mattingly argues quite convincingly that there is a connection between this phenomena and the results of recently published research which indicate the American media elite—journalists and news broadcasters working for such nationally influential U.S. media as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, the news departments at NBC, CBS, ABC and PBS—are far more indifferent or hostile to religion and to universal values associated with religion than the statistically average American.<sup>7</sup>

The Rothman-Lichter study that Mattingly alludes to established among other things that the “predominant characteristic of the media elite is its secular outlook. Exactly 50 percent eschew any religious affiliation.” This contrasts with other national surveys in which seventy percent of the public claims membership in a religious group. Only 8 percent of the media elite go to church or synagogue weekly and “86 percent seldom or never attend religious services.” Almost one in four (23 percent) was raised in a Jewish household.

Considering the violent anti-clerical origins of modern journalism in Renaissance Italy and pre-revolutionary France and the much stronger anti-clerical and socialist traditions and attachments of the European social and cultural strata that produces or moulds journalists, we can assume that indifference or hostility to religious life among European journalists is even greater than among Americans.<sup>8</sup>

How much greater the gap then, when Western “media elites” encounter religious phenomena and expression in an Islamic society, where religious values and the cultural significance of religion are far more pervasive than in American or European society. The point Mattingly makes about the poor coverage of religion is that the hostile or secular reporter is *unable to recognize* a religious news story unless it directly intrudes into public domains not usually or exclusively associated with religion. In the case of Islam, that usually means

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Mattingly, “The Religion Beat,” *The Quill*, January 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Mattingly quotes from research published by Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, “Media and Business Elites,” *Public Opinion*, Oct-Nov. 1981:42.

<sup>8</sup> See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Cambridge University press, 1979.

that the Big Four agencies and the Western press in general can only recognize an "Islamic angle" to the news when someone is getting insulted, kidnapped or killed in the name of Islam.

Here is one particularly pertinent example. In the months preceding Sadat's September 1981 crackdown on militant Islamic political groups and other opposition, nearly every Western news organization managed to cover Sheikh Kishk. He was good copy, good picture: A blind, impassioned Sheikh, his head held back, his blank eyes open to Heaven as he denounced the government week after week for tolerating or even encouraging a variety of sins. His sermons were intensely emotional and his audience was always visibly moved, and to a degree that Western reporters in attendance found exciting and significant.

But during all the years of actively practicing journalism in Cairo (1974-1983) I do not recall any of the Western news organizations reporting on the doings of Sheikh Metwalli Sha'rawi, an extraordinary religious personality with a far vaster and much more representative audience for his televised talks, his articles, his *tafsir* and other books than that enjoyed by Sheikh Kishk, despite the popularity of Sheikh Kishk's audio cassettes with the militant Muslim youth.

Sheikh Sha'rawi, in a very different but perhaps more traditional sense—as a moral counselor to rulers—is also very political. He was known as an opponent of Nasser and he held a cabinet post under Sadat. His break with Sadat and disappearance from Egypt TV was far more significant for what it foretold of Sadat's rapidly growing isolation than Kishk's predictable opposition. Sheikh Sha'rawi is certainly at least as much of a public figure and religious phenomena in Egypt as Billy Graham was in 1950s America and any European correspondent covering Washington during those years inevitably wrote about the Rev. Graham.

But despite all of this, because Sheikh Sha'rawi could not conceivably be characterized as inciting a riot, an uprising or political killings, he did not exist as "good copy."

In the late seventies any militant Islamic demonstration at one of the Cairo universities—demonstrations which ranged in size from a few hundred to at most several thousand, or perhaps even ten thousand, were avidly pursued by the Western press. But during those same years half a million Egyptians could converge on downtown Cairo for religious devotions on the occasion of Maulid al Nabi or Maulid Sayedna Hussein and the events would not be worthy of report.

The same reduction of Islamic phenomena to a narrowed down Islamic political phenomena is a form of *reverse-secularism* that equally plagues attempts at self-conscious "Islamic journalism." Secularism classically insists that religion has nothing to do with the public, or rather, the political do-

main. *The reverse-secularism* of Western and Islamic movement journalism insists that religion is worthy of reporting only in the political domain, and a political domain of confrontation.

The specific danger of "Islamic journalism" to date is that the journalist substitutes the life and activities of the various Islamic movements for the life and activities of a much broader Islamically conscious society; mainstream Muslim society, of which the political movements are but a small part: much incidentally in the way that a militant Marxist journalist or publicist would substitute the party for the far larger working classes that the party presumably represented.

So once we discount *stance*, or ideological positioning, there really isn't that much difference between Big Four reporting on Islam and the product of present-day Islamic journalism—the Big Four was excited by Sheikh Kishk and perceived him as a threat; the Islamic journalist was excited by Sheikh Kishk and perceived him as a heroic figure. Both ignored Sheikh Sha'rawi and the thousand and one inspirational stories to be found anywhere in the Muslim world where Muslims gather to pray; to study Quran, to invoke Allah's name, to distribute sadaqa and zakat, to perform umra and pilgrimage, to memorize and recite Quran, to live out their lives, to the best of their ability, in this increasingly difficult world, in submission to God.

When the "Islamic journalist" substitutes the life and drama of the Islamic movements for the life and drama of Islamic society, he not only over-politicizes Islam but he invariably becomes sidetracked into the same sort of surface reporting of organized political life in the Muslim world that characterizes the secular press and ends up even reporting poorly on many political or public developments of profound importance to Muslims, i.e. news worthy.

*Arabia* is, I believe, the most professional of the English-language Islamic movement publications. But its reporting on Egypt resembles that of the Big Four or the Western news magazines—the focus is on organized political life, only the ideological stance is different. I cannot recall a single story in *Arabia* concerning the running administrative and court battle over the past decade on the issue of whether or not Egyptair flights would serve or sell alcohol—a ten year running story of great personal importance (newsworthiness) to any pious Muslim and particularly to the hundreds of thousands who fly Egyptair. And a story with a "happy ending" from the Muslim perspective.

Whether the various Islamic movements rise or fall, the percentage of middle class women in Cairo who have adopted some form of Islamic dress continues to rise. When I re-opened the NBC bureau in Cairo in 1974 none of the dozen or so women who worked at the State Information Service Office in the Television Building where foreign correspondents are accredited,

wore Islamic dress. Now most do. At other centers of study or work similar if somewhat less dramatic transformations are visible. Even Al-Ahram's editor Ibrahim Saada, in the course of a commentary on Shari'a, concedes that the majority of Egyptian women voluntarily opted for Islamic dress. But I do not recall many reports on this trend in English-language publications devoted to what I would characterize as "Islamic journalism."

Nor for that matter can I recall serious coverage of opposite trends; the apparent "lupen-proletarianization" of many of the rural and working class youth in Cairo who neither pray, nor fast during Ramadan—the other, ominous and perhaps inevitable side of the coin to what is basically a middle-class religious revival.

And all of this in the very domain of political Islamic journalism, not to mention, as I alluded to earlier, the near total absence of reporting on the great spiritual events of traditional Islam—the ongoing editing or production of literary works in *tafsir* (Quranic commentary), *hadith* (canonic accounts of the Prophet's sayings and exemplary behaviour); *sira* (biography), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), classical Arabic language studies and *tassawuf* (Islamic mysticism); the comings and goings of great spiritual luminaries and accounts of their highly quotable public lectures and *diwan* literature (collections of mystical or pietistic poetry). In other words the still living traditional Islamic culture that is inevitably ignored by the journalism of "Islamic Ideology" and inescapably so, given the historic origin of both journalism and "ideology" as anti-traditional forces emerging from the Renaissance and the French Revolution.

All of this is to suggest that to contemplate the existence of an Islamic news agency staffed by professional Muslim journalists does not necessarily mean one has resolved the problems of inadequate coverage. It is, as I have alluded to earlier, in the nature and origin of modern mass media to attract to it individuals more likely than not to be alienated from traditional forms and values and to reinforce that alienation. It can even be argued that in the Islamic world the position of the journalist has been even more marginal to mainstream traditional values given the predominant role played by non-Muslims in the introduction of mass media throughout the Muslim world.

### III. ISLAMIC

Since the news agency is a modern Western institution to talk about an Islamic news agency means to talk of more than adding the word "islamic" before the words "news agency." It means to Islamicize the practice of journalism much as Islamic banking means to Islamicize modern banking, with all the difficulties that has entailed.

The analogy to Islamic banking is carefully chosen. The core of modern journalism, that the public has "the right to know" (e.g. the invasion of privacy, the appeal to idle curiosity, the appeal to a sovereign "public opinion" however unqualified, the circulation of discomfiting news that may expose the vices of the Muslim rather than cover them up) and that "nothing is sacred," is as inherently anti-Islamic as the interest-based core of modern banking.<sup>9</sup>

Historians of the Renaissance honor the 16th century Venetian vagabond and blackmailer Pietro Aretino (known in his time as "the scourge of princes") as the "father of modern journalism." Aretino's publicly distributed "letters" or journals containing reportage and commentary on his times, were flavored according to all accounts, by insults, slander and obscenities generally directed at the Pope, monks and priests. Aretino's journals were popular precisely because they invaded privacy and agitated an emerging Western public opinion, as printing press replaced the pulpit for news.

Modern journalism's seemingly contradictory professional standard or ethic or accuracy, truthfulness and objectivity is to be found, in part, in an alternative historic stream originating, again during the Renaissance in the news letters sent by the agents of the earliest Christian banking houses (the Fuggers and the Medici) that were prepared to openly flaunt the medieval Christian ban on usury. Here was the utilitarian source of modern journalistic objectivity—it paid to "get it right."

What is "news?" What is "new-ness?" Peace, stability and continuity is not news but conflict, contention and disorder is. Respectability and moral conformity (an Islamic virtue, however infashionable the idea of conformity may be in contemporary times) is not news, but erupting scandal is.

As we have already suggested many of the acceptable modes and techniques of modern journalism must be particularly repugnant to an Islamic perspective. Spying and seeking to confirm suspicions (e.g. most investigative reporting) are forbidden by Quran and hadith as are slander and backbiting, which means spreading stories, even though true, which injure the feeling and honor of a Muslim. Slander is not simply a legal error or an occupational hazard; it is a great sin. In numerous hadith the Muslims are forbidden to publicize their own and others' faults; on the contrary, the Muslim is urged to cover up or hide faults.

The Prophet (PBUH) was asked: Which of the Muslims is better? He said: "The one from whose tongue and hand the Muslims are safe. An-Nawawi says this means to refrain from what hurts the Muslims in speech or deed and restraint from scorning them."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The social role of the printing press and its progeny, modern journalism is most comprehensively studied in Eisenstein's work cited above.

<sup>10</sup> Hadith and interpretation in An-Nawawi, *Sharh Arba'in An Nawawi* and *Sahih Muslim - Sharh An-Nawawi*.

There are of course exceptions to all of these prohibitions but the exceptions concern military affairs and specific requirements of administering justice, not the needs of an enterprising reporter.

What then are Islamic criteria for the practice of modern journalism? First, necessity. The entire Muslim world is rapidly being incorporated into an international secular culture based on mass communication—newspapers, magazines, television, radio and film—that is breaching the cultural forms that have protected Islamic consciousness.

Islamic journalism can attempt at best to offer alternative mass communication experiences to those destabilizing experiences contained within the typical mass communication news messages.

Islamic journalism would in such a context encourage good and discourage evil by providing “news” written in a professionally acceptable, objective style that honors truth; that encourages the belief and practice of Islam and discourages practices and beliefs that deny Islam and in particular calls attention to and encourages participation in what remains of traditional, direct, personal religious, “systems” of communication.

#### IV. FEASIBILITY

Sixty-five percent of the budget of a typical Associated Press major overseas bureau such as Cairo covers communication costs, which include the bureau's share of teleprinter costs to send the world service to subscribers; and the Cairo share of satellite duplex and standby telex costs for transmitting and receiving news to and from the London computer handling the world service.

Avoiding breaking news and concentrating upon feature news would eliminate significant areas of operation requiring expensive communications technology. Provision of more timely news features that relate directly as backgrounders to breaking news could be offered as a special service at low cost via the eventual 24 hour duplex satellite lines linking the IINA to its subscribers; assuming cooperation could be secured with the IINA. (A review of potential news feature backgrounders derived from intrinsically Islamic news items carried by IINA in the attached sample files will illustrate this approach.)

Background news features can be developed at relatively low cost by local correspondents of an independent Islamic news agency or assembled from research resources at central bureaus double-checking their data by telephone inquiries. Thus the news features service avoids the financially impossible task of competing directly with Big Four coverage, which would require rushing correspondents about for on-scene coverage of breaking news stories effecting

the Muslim world at great expense for transport, living and communication costs.

Mass Communication researchers Singletary and Lamb recently examined award winning news photos and statistically established the willingness of newspaper editors and readers to honor, *in feaure photos*, such values as “sympathy, warmth, beauty, courage, and above all, coping with adversity.”<sup>11</sup>

The authors contrast this positive response to hard news photo values that are “overwhelmingly negative in their apparent emotional tone, dominated by the emotion of despair and emotional trauma in which people appear in conflict with others or in conflict with natural elements. And in which the drama of physical action heightened the tension.”

Timeliness or immediacy was the other related factor. Hard news photos were just that—the fleeting moment of death, suicide, injury, battle or robbery-in-progress, whereas the feature news photo situation lingers on.

The study parallels our own evaluation of journalistic modes in light of Islamic criteria and again it is the news feature approach which is far more feasible from an Islamic perspective, than hard news coverage.

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<sup>11</sup> Singletary and Lamb, “News Values in Winning Photos,” *Journalism Quarterly*, Spring 1984.