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Mass Media and Islamic Religious Propagation (Da'wah) in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

The contemporary religious calling has gradually adopted technology because the audience it tries to attract is highly preoccupied with technology, which has become an essential facilitator of communication. Muslim preachers have gradually, but successfully, pushed the media to the frontline as an important tool. This paper examines the use of the mass media for *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan. Although the conventional face-to-face interaction is the dominant mode of *da'wah*, the Islamic organizations are also aware of the impact of the mass media on 'evangelism.' Nonetheless, the financial implications of the broadcast media diverts many *da'wah* groups to the print media (i.e. newspaper, magazine, books) and more importantly, the internet. Therefore, we conclude that, although the Kyrgyz mass media is, undoubtedly, perceived as capable of influencing the people's minds, the desire and expertise for exploiting the broadcast media is not deep among the *da'wah* experts in the country. Therefore, we recommended that they make effective use of these media for *da'wah*.

Keywords: Mass Media, *Da'wah*, Kyrgyzstan, Islamic Organizations

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan, a country in central Asia, was part of the Soviet Union for almost seven decades. The general dislike for religion led to the prohibition of the dissemination of religious materials,¹ abolition of formal religious education, and the prevention of people from practising religion in public spaces. These rules affected the people's religious consciousness. Therefore, religious customs became interspersed with the indigenous traditions. After independence in 1991, the people adopted a dualistic approach to religion in which state structures were disengaged from religious affairs. The state Constitution, therefore, endorses freedom of religion with no governmental interferences in religious affairs. Unfortunately, like the Soviet period, those people born in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan did not have the privilege of Islamic religious education. Nonetheless, today, as a Muslim country, the traditional method of *da'wah*) is still dominant.

However, the present global religious community has adopted technology for religious propagation because the audience it tries to attract is used to technology and innovation. Technology has, therefore, become an essential medium of communication. The 21st century is the age of the internet generation (N-gen), the digital generation (D-gen) or what Prensky terms, the "Digital Natives",² who do everything the technological way and naturally communicate with the digital media. Much of their daily communication has become technology-mediated. Thus, with the powerful influence of mass communication, people are becoming more sensitive to the digital screen than the traditional interpersonal communication. The mass media has, therefore, attracted the attention of Muslim preachers as an important medium of *da'wah*. Studies show that the public gathers information on different fields from the media, with television,³ newspaper, magazine, radio, and the internet being primary sources. Nonetheless, the mass media is not only a medium of information but it also influences human behaviour, way of thinking

¹ Eric McGlinchey, *Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan* (Seattle, WA: NCEEER, 2009), 1

² Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", *On the Horizon*, 9/5 (2001), 1-6

³ James Curran, "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study" *European Journal of Communication*, 24/1(2009), 5-26

and understanding the world. It has been effective in influencing public perception,⁴ although this influence may be temporary.⁵

Hence, Muslim preachers, worldwide, have used the mass media for promoting religious values.⁶ This paper examines the role of the mass media in Islamic *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan. How has the media influenced public perception about Islam in Kyrgyzstan? What is the extent of the use of the mass media for *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan? Has the mass media been effective for *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan? What are the issues and challenges in the use of the mass media for *da'wah* purposes in the country?

Conceptual Framework

a. *Mass Media*

Scholars often disagree about the definition of Mass Communication or Mass Media.⁷ Essentially, there are three modes of communication. These are intrapersonal,⁸ interpersonal,⁹ and group communication.¹⁰ These are all means for sharing information in society. In mass communication, the message is addressed, in a professional way, to a larger audience and might emanate from an individual or a group. In order to reach an audience, communication needs a medium. This medium could be oral or written. The oral medium could be electronic: radio or television, film, music, etc. The written media include: newspapers, magazines, journals, books, booklets, etc. Furthermore, the oral and written-based information could also be disseminated electronically through the internet. The above means of mass communication are collectively known as “mass media.” O’Sullivan and others explain mass communication to include: “...

⁴ Yuki Sampei & Midori Aoyagi-Usui, “Mass-Media Coverage, its Influence on Public Awareness of Climate-Change Issues, and Implications for Japan’s National Campaign to reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions”, *Global Environmental Change* 19 (2009), 203-204

⁵ S.M. Driedger, “Risk and the Media: A Comparison of Print and Televised News Stories of a Canadian drinking Water Risk Event”, *Risk Analysis*, 27/3 (2007), 775-786

⁶ D.E. Schulz, “Promises of (Im)mediate Salvation: Islam, Broadcast Media, and the Remaking of Religious Experience in Mali”, *American Ethnologist*, 33/2 (2006) 210-229.

⁷ David Demers, *Dictionary of Mass Communication & Media Research: A Guide for Students, Scholars and Professionals* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2005), 9

⁸ J.E. Fletcher, et-al, eds, *Intrapersonal Communication Processes. Physiological Foundations of Intrapersonal Communication* (New Orleans, LA: Spectra, 1989).

⁹ J.T. Wood, *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 9

¹⁰ G.V. Chockler, et-al., “Group Communication Specifications: A Comprehensive Study”, *ACM Computing Surveys*, 33/4 (2001), 427-469

newspapers, magazines, cinema, television, radio and advertising; sometimes including book publishing (especially popular fiction) and music (the pop industry).”¹¹ Therefore, mass communication should be conceived as a connotation rather than a descriptive term because the audience is considered as a large socially alienated, unskilled, and wandering workforce.¹² Mass communication could be defined as:

... the practice and product of providing leisure entertainment and information to an unknown audience by means of corporately financed, industrially produced, state regulated, high technology, privately consumed commodity in the modern print, screen, audio and broadcast media.¹³

O’Sullivan and his co-authors help us to define “mass media” because, in attempting to understand mass media, we need to first understand its broader context as that provides the basis for deepening our understanding. Demers also defines mass communication as: “the process through which messages reach the audience via the mass media.”¹⁴ This definition makes the mass media a facilitator of mass communication. Another scholar defines mass communication as: “the process of designing and delivering cultural messages and stories to diverse audiences through media channels as old as the book and as new as the Internet.”¹⁵ A third definition says it is:

the process by which a complex organization, with the aid of one or more machines, produces and transmits public messages that are directed [to] a large, heterogeneous, and scattered audiences.¹⁶

Demers further defines it as “the process of delivering messages to a large number of geographically separated people through a technologically based medium.”¹⁷ These definitions place a thin line

¹¹ T. O’Sullivan, et-al., *Key Concepts in Communication* (Toronto: Methuen, 1983), 130

¹² Rowland Lorimer & Paddy Scannell, *Mass Communications: A Comparative Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 21

¹³ O’Sullivan, et-al, 1983, 131

¹⁴ Demers, *Dictionary*, p. 9

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

between mass communication and mass media. Therefore, our conclusion is that “mass media” refers to the channels of communication and it involves the transmission of information in some way or form to large numbers of people.

b. Da‘wah

Da‘wah refers to ‘a call’ or ‘invitation.’ The word is used in the Qur’an in different contexts. It is used for the call of humankind to the truth (of monotheism)¹⁸ or invitation of people to the wrong path.¹⁹ However, it is more frequently used for the call to Allah’s path and salvation.²⁰ Therefore, we use it in the sense of calling humankind to the path of Allah.²¹ It also applies to the context of educating people about Islam; softly debating and persuading people in the best way; creating awareness to maintain or strengthen other’s faith and knowledge about Islam.²²

Mass Media and its Impact on the Individual

Since creation, humankind has disseminated information through communication. According to Schramm, communication is “... produced with the intent of structuring a situation for someone else, of influencing him to act, or believe or feel in a certain way.”²³ Therefore, communication has the potential to shape one’s perception about world affairs. In Islamic history, one observed that information (i.e. divine message) changed the ignorant tribes of ancient Arabia into people of fine morals. Inversely, information has also influenced people to fight each other, and this is exemplified by the Arab spring which began in Tunisia. The role of information in the Arab spring is explained by Khouri in his observation that, “social media in relation to the Arab Uprisings is like Paul Revere’s horse in relation to the American Revolution.”²⁴ Although it was not “a

¹⁸ Qur’an 23:73; 2:221

¹⁹ Qur’an 14:22; 40:42.

²⁰ 2:221, 3:104, 7:193, 10:25, 106, 108, 16:125, 22:67, 23:73, 28:87.

²¹ Qur’an 4:165; Abdus Salam, *Da‘wah Guide* (New-Delhi: Bharat Offset Press Delhi, 2000), 1-3

²² Qur’an 9:33; M.A. Zin, *Islamic Da‘wah (Mission): The Definition, Conception and Foundation* (Kuala-Lumpur: Penerbitan Pustaka Antara, 1991), 3.

²³ Wilbur Schramm & Donald Roberts, eds., *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 349.

²⁴ R.G. Khouri, “Putting out the Syrian fire”, *The New York Times* (October 23, 2013); Crystal Douglas, et-al., “The Arab Uprisings: Causes, Consequences, and Perspectives

direct cause” of the rebellion, it will be impossible to overrule the role of information because social and the mass media contributed to the global consciousness about the groups whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, or Libya.²⁵

In recent times, the impact of the Mass media has taken centre stage²⁶ and discussion has been ongoing about the effects of information disseminated through it. Research shows that the mass media has a dominant effect on information in society.²⁷ As far back as the 1930s, the mass media was ascribed substantial influence over human judgment being able to “shape public opinion and belief, change habits of life, actively mould behaviour and impose political systems even against resistance.”²⁸ Of course, this was not premised on any scientific enquiry but reflections on the unexpected expansion of the initially limited audience and the popular press, radio and television.²⁹

The above clarifies why a thirty-second space at prime-time on Fox-TV costs an average of US\$ 518,466 during the popular show, *American Idol*.³⁰ Hence, to uphold that the mass media has no influence on the society or the individuals is to suppose that it is not important in the spread or management of information. The media influence has never been underestimated in any society and, therefore, the main concern is the extent of the influence. In the 1950s, mass media was considered as a powerful tool with maximum and immediate effect on individuals. Therefore, based on critical and sound assumptions, political office-holders presumed that the mass media could corrupt society, spread new and sometimes dangerous ideas and thereby influence the people against the established

(An Extended Summary of a Panel Discussion with Rami Khouri)”, *Working Paper, no.1* (International Conflict Analysis and Transformation, Kennesaw State University, U.S.A., March 2014), 16

²⁵ Crystal Douglas, et-al, p.16; Sean Aday, et-al, *Blogs and Bullets II: New Media and Conflict after the Arab Spring [Peaceworks no.80]* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2012), 3ff

²⁶ S.K. Srygley, “Influence of Mass Media on Today’s Young People”, *Educational Leadership*, 35/7(1978), 526

²⁷ R.M. Liebert & N.S. Schwartzberg, “Effects of Mass Media”, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 28 (1977), 141-173.

²⁸ Denis Mcquail, “The Influence and Effects of Mass Media”, in James Curran, et-al. eds. (pp.70-93), *Mass Communication and Society* (Beverly Hills, SAGE, 1979),79

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Fact pack. 4th Annual Guide for Advertising Marketing, Crain Communications Inc., February 27, 2006, 28.

norms of the state. Hence, these leaders often kept the mass media under strict control in the name of national security. Furthermore, leaders of religious countries tried to control the printing industries under the guise of protecting religious doctrines. They assume that the print media could distort religious doctrines and change religious policies. For example, Larsson refers to printing censorship in Rome from the final document endorsed by the 5th Lateran Council (1512-1517) below:

We therefore establish and ordain that henceforth, for all future time, no one may dare to print or have printed any book or other writings of whatever kind in Rome or in any other cities and dioceses, without the book or writings having first been closely examined, at Rome by our vicar and the master of the sacred places ...³¹

Nonetheless, as we indicated earlier, this perception about the mass media was not based on any form of academic enquiry. The first systematic research on the effects of the mass media began in 1920 following the propaganda used by the belligerents of World War I to justify their aggressions. According to Rodman:

During the war, propaganda had been so blatant, and apparently so useful, on the part of both Allies and their enemies, that people feared the media had become powerful enough to brainwash innocent people by influencing them in ways that they did not realize.³²

Thus, the early scientific study of the media assumed that it was a powerful force. Mass media information was, therefore, perceived as capable of vigorously stimulating an action and simultaneously provoking reaction.³³ For example, Lasswell's study on propaganda techniques used during World War I came-out with the 'Hypodermic Needle theory' which indicates that when information is directly transmitted to the audience, it

³¹ Gören Larsson, *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2011), 27.

³² George Rodman, *Mass Media in a Changing World*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 31.

³³ Brian O'Neill, "Media Effects in Context", in Virginia Nightingale, ed. *The Handbook of Media Audiences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 6.

could induce direct response.³⁴ Payne Fund, confirming the plausibility of the above theory, demonstrates the impact of television series with sexual content on teenagers.³⁵ Therefore, one realizes from the post-World War I research that the media has direct and immediate influence on individuals. Thus, the predictive theory was justifiable because it was devised at a time the mass media, especially radio and television, hardly caught attention.

After World War I, the belligerents entered a period of deep socio-economic and political crisis³⁶ during which people could easily be persuaded because they tended to believe any information which justified their frame of thought. Remarque's popular novel, which discussed the course of the war shows how even less trustworthy information was accepted by the people. The hero in the novel, Paul Bäumer, indicated thus:

‘But there are more lies told by the other side than by us,’ say I; ‘just think of those pamphlets the prisoners have on them, where it says that we eat Belgian children. The fellows who write those lies ought to go and hang themselves. They are the real culprits.’³⁷

The mass media gains even more influence when information is limited and controlled by the state. In this case, the public structures its understanding of world or national affairs only through the information received from the mass media. This makes the media a powerful tool. In this era of globalization, the flow of information has become so diverse that the power of the mass media seems not only to be dwindling but it also oscillates between sort of rise-and-fall scenarios in which the influence depends on circumstance. No message influences in a vacuum. The power of the mass media depends on its interaction with other forms of information in society.³⁸ Therefore, Gerbner's ‘cultivation theory’ postulates that, over time, the use of media will cultivate a certain

³⁴ Brian O'Neill, “Media Effects in Context”, 7.

³⁵ Rodman, *Mass Media*, 39.

³⁶ Brian Martin, “Politics after a Nuclear Crisis”, *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 9/2 (1990), 71; J.H. Williams, “Economic lessons of two World Wars”, *Foreign Affairs*, 16 (1947), 134-154.

³⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, trans. by: A.W. Wheen, *All Quiet On The Western Front* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 98.

³⁸ Schramm & Roberts, *The Process*, 374

worldview in users.³⁹ Hence, for example, the constant depiction of Muslims perpetrating violence has eventually created a certain consciousness about terrorism in the minds of the receivers. Thus, the mass media has the power to influence new ideas or behaviour over time. This metamorphosed into the “diffusion of innovation” theory.⁴⁰ Rogers postulated that different people would adopt new ideas differently and at different times. He, therefore, divided them into five categories, namely: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards.⁴¹

The mass media also infuses new ideas while influencing the receivers’ way of interpreting information because it presents the information to fit the popular worldview of the audience bearing in mind the desired impact it wants to make on the audience at any moment. Since it is often difficult for people to construct a holistic image or perception, the mass media begins to construct it gradually and this might escape the normal heavy resistance to new information which opposes existing worldviews.⁴² For example, for some non-Muslims, following developments in some corners of the world, it is quite paradoxical for Muslims to still argue that Islam is a religion of peace, because then the behaviour of some Muslims becomes a contradictory illustration to this argument. This entrenched perception, for example, demands a *da‘wah* approach that redefines the image of Islam in a way that is gradual, logical, peaceful and convincing to the polemics. Thus, Tariq Ramadan, referred to by one author as “a media hype” or “a product of Euro-American media sensationalism”,⁴³ having been exposed to the western society where the people have a separately constructed image of Islam,⁴⁴ mainly espouses the importance of critical and liberal thinking in matters of politics and the need for the mutual endorsement of religious diversity while drawing moral guidelines from the life of Prophet Muhammad for today’s Muslims.⁴⁵ Each of his speeches might change, expand, or diffuse into the

³⁹ Rodman, *Mass Media*, 43.

⁴⁰ E.M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (NY: Free Press, 2003)

⁴¹ *ibid*, 281-4 & 298

⁴² Schramm & Roberts, *The Process*, 368-369.

⁴³ Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008), 133

⁴⁴ Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999)

⁴⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: O.U.P., 2004), 53; Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73.

cognition of the receivers in such a way that they become ready to receive the next information.

The mass media, therefore, not only tells us what to think about but also how to do the thinking itself. Information sources not only decide what to broadcast but also determine how it should be packaged. This is known as “framing” which is a process of reorienting one’s thinking about a matter.⁴⁶ In communication, framing is the process of organizing “everyday reality” in a way that conveys a certain implication of evolving events to promote a certain understanding of political affairs.⁴⁷ Thus, for example, news about an Israeli air-strike on Gaza was once reported by three media houses as follows:

- ✓ “Israel Air Defense intercepts more Rockets as Fighting continues”,⁴⁸
- ✓ “Palestinian rockets reach farther into Israel”,⁴⁹; and
- ✓ “Israel and Hamas exchange fire”,⁵⁰

Without reading these articles, it becomes conspicuous that the media houses have “framed” Gaza as an aggressor while Israel is implied as the defender thereby portraying the age-old conflict as one between the oppressor (Hamas’ Gaza) and the oppressed (Israel). The argument of the media actively dictating to the audience how to think about the conflict, therefore, radiates from a reflection on the contemporary worldwide media reportage on aggressive political maneuverings. According to a research by Wilhelm Kempf, the mass media also tried to put Iraq in a negative light and simultaneously showed the United States (US) as a positive actor during the First Gulf War.⁵¹ Furthermore, the anti-Iraq coalition led by the US was eulogized by the media “... as acting with the main purpose of liberating Kuwait and only rarely was the alliance suspected of acting to

⁴⁶ Dennis Chong & J.N. Druckman, “Framing Theory”, *Annual Review Political Science*, 10 (2007), 104.

⁴⁷ D.V. Shah, et-al., “News Framing and Cueing of Issue Regimes: Explaining Clinton’s Public Approval in Spite of Scandal”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66 (2002), 343

⁴⁸*The Wall Street Journal* (10th July 2014 edition)

⁴⁹*Los Angeles Times* (9th July 2014)

⁵⁰*New York Times* (9th July 2014)

⁵¹ Erin Collins, et-al., “Shifting Power: US Hegemony and the Media”, *The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies*, 2 (2004), 33.

secure a supply of oil and stabilize petroleum prices around the world”.⁵² Meanwhile, in 2003, after the invasion of Iraq, the same media was accused by the Bush administration of ‘turning public opinion against the war.’⁵³

All the above theories show that the mass media has the power to structure, maintain, strengthen and promote a certain perception about world affairs. However, it is important to note that all these outcomes are expected to occur in the context of a complex societal system wherein the dominant perception of reality plays crucial role. The thinking that mass media has a strong influence on individuals undoubtedly makes it the most effective tool for informing, educating, persuading and transforming. The assumption, therefore, is that the mass media could be used effectively for *da‘wah* because both the mass media and *da‘wah* have the common aim of informing, persuading, and transforming the mind-set.

Sample

Mass media covers both the print industry (i.e. newspapers, magazines, etc) and the electronic media (i.e. radio, television, internet, etc). However, we will focus on how the television and radio are used for *da‘wah*. This is underpinned by a research by Taira in which he argues that people still prefer to use the ‘old’ media (i.e. newspapers, television and radio).⁵⁴ This assumption is applicable to Kyrgyzstan because the findings of a study by M-Vector, a multinational Consulting Agency, about media consumption and perceptions in Kyrgyzstan, proves that television is the main source of information (89.5%), followed by Internet (6%) and radio (3.4%).⁵⁵ Taira further argues that television and radio are trusted because they provide analyzed and filtered information and users know the sources of information while the ‘new’ media is the “...arena of a chaotic abundance of information about religion”⁵⁶ and more often with anonymous sources. The M-Vector findings also named television as the

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ M.A. Baum & P.B.K. Potter, “The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 (2008),39-65.

⁵⁴ Teemu Taira, “Does the ‘Old’ Media’s Coverage of Religion Matter in Times of ‘Digital Religion’?”, *Digital Religion*, 25 (2013), 207.

⁵⁵ M-Vector Research and Consulting Company, *Media Consumption and Consumer Perceptions Survey 2012 (3rd Wave)* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2013), 10.

⁵⁶ Taira, “Does”, 210.

most trustworthy source of information. 86.2% of respondents indicated that they trust the information provided via TV.⁵⁷ The 'old' media, according to Taira, reaches ordinary people with basic religious information, while the religious content in the 'new' media is accessed by people who seek more information about those religious issues.⁵⁸ *Da'wah* reaches out not only to those who are willing to know more about Islam, but also, even those who seem disinterested. It is thus logical to assume that, given the socio-religious, cultural, economic and educational conditions of Kyrgyzstan, the 'old' media (television and radio) is seen to be more effective for *da'wah* than the 'new' media.

The 'old' media reaches people all over the country, while the new media is mainly confined to urban and educational centres. Studies on people's access to the internet, for example, quote between 18% and 50%. According to the State Telecommunication Agency, the internet penetration rate in 2013 was 50.8%, yet, the M-Vector reported a much lower figure of 28.2% as at 1 March 2013.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Mamasaliev, a member of the *The Internet Movement*, quotes as less as 18%.⁶⁰ The wide discrepancies in the above figures raise questions about accuracy. Yet, no clear methodology for their derivation is available to us for review. This stifles our insight into the reality in Kyrgyzstan in terms of the actual rate of internet usage. The basic fact in the midst of the above figures, therefore, is that the new media driven by the internet might not be as effective as the old media for Islamic *da'wah*. This is because, contrary to the above, television reaches about 98.6% while radio reaches 56.7%, all of the total population of the country.⁶¹ This situation not only makes television and radio significant partners for *da'wah* but gives them an edge over all others in terms of facilitating daily Islamic interaction in Kyrgyzstan. Further, radio and television do not require audience to read or search for information as it is in the case of the 'new' media.

a. Television

⁵⁷ M-Vector, *Media*, 10

⁵⁸ Taira, "Does", 215.

⁵⁹ M-Vector, *Media*, 4

⁶⁰ <http://kyrnet.kg/archives/386>, 20/05/2014.

⁶¹ M-Vector, *Media*, 4

There are 9 public and 18 private TV channels in Kyrgyzstan.⁶² In this research, we focused on two public and two private channels. There are seven regions in Kyrgyzstan, each of which has a channel which transmits only in that region and is funded by the state. Thus, among the 9 public channels, 7 are regional and 2 are state channels which cover the whole country. In our research, we studied these two state channels.

- 1) OTRK, a public channel, has the widest coverage and covers the whole country. It is the favourite and most watched TV channel.⁶³
- 2) EL-TR, another public channel, is the second biggest national broadcaster which ranks next to OTRK in terms of public viewing.⁶⁴
- 3) Star TV is a private entertainment channel. It broadcasts a programme on Islam. It is one of the two private channels in Kyrgyzstan which produce Islamic programmes.
- 4) Manas Janyrygy TV is the second of the two private channels which broadcast Islamic programmes. Nonetheless, it is one of the less patronized stations in the country.⁶⁵ However, their Islamic programmes justify their inclusion in our survey.

⁶² Interview: Begaiym Kanat kyzy, Press Secretary, Ministry of Transport and Communications, Kyrgyzstan, 24/03/2015.

⁶³ M-Vector, *Media*, 10

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

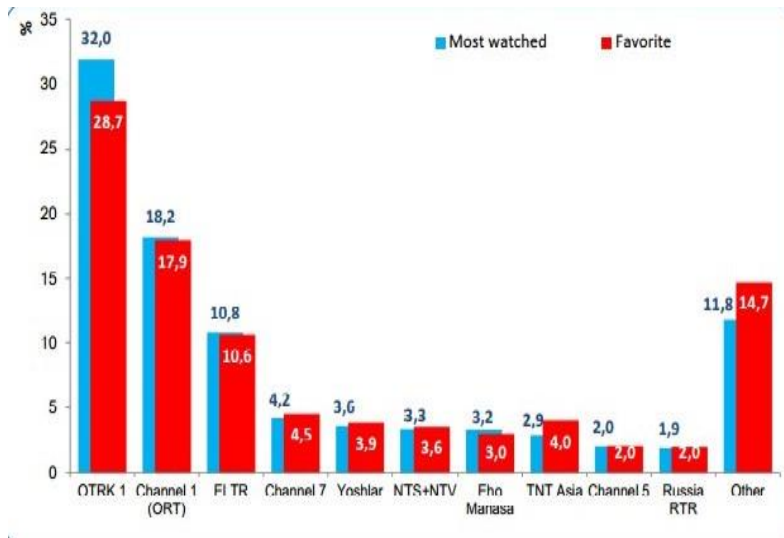


Figure 1: Popularity of Broadcasting Channels in Kyrgyzstan (Source: M-Vector, *Media*, p.10)

From the above chart, the second popular channel is ORT. However, this channel was excluded from our research because it is a Russian owned channel which broadcasts to Kyrgyzstan. M-Vector’s research studied only the top ten channels. Therefore, foreign terrestrial or satellite channels which, together with others, are tagged collectively in the chart as “other channels”, were not included in this study although some of them have considerable patronage in the country. Star TV is included in the “other channels”, therefore, it is impossible to isolate its percentage or quantify its popularity. In any case, the channels we selected for the study accounted for 46.1% (i.e. OTRK + EL-TR + Manas Janyrygy TV) + 1.5% (Star TV) of the population under the “most watched” category and the majority of 65.8% when we include Channel ORT. This gives us a good sample of the best avenue to catch the attention of the people as far as *Da’wah* is concerned.

b. Radio

Radio is said to be popular among 41.1% of the population of Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁶ An important factor for the success of a radio station is the target it marks of a specific segment of the community while determining the right broadcasting format. A few radio stations broadcast educational

⁶⁶ M-Vector, *Media*, 10

programmes and irrespective of their ratings, they will be important for our study. They are:

- 1) Birinchi Radio: this public station is one of the most popular news outlets of Kyrgyzstan and covers the whole country. It broadcasts news, events, educational programs and interviews. The weekly coverage of Birinchi Radio is estimated at 770,220 people according to the M-Vector study.
- 2) Manas Janyrygy, a private radio station, has programmes on Islam. However, like its TV channel, it is not very popular among the people, and covers mostly the city of Bishkek.

Mass Media and *Da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has 51 registered Islamic organizations of which 29 are in Bishkek.⁶⁷ Each of these organizations has its own method of *da'wah*. Among them are: the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK) which is recognized as the official mouthpiece of the Muslims in the country. Its establishment occurred coterminously with that of the *Da'wah* Department in 1996. Others include Mutakalim (1999) which has branches in Toktogul, Osh, Balykchy, Karakol and Aravan.⁶⁸ There are also Adep Bashaty, one of the biggest Non-Governmental Organizations; World Foundation of Muslim Youth, a multinational Islamic organization with membership in 75 countries, and headquartered in Saudi Arabia; Sunnat founded by Ilyaz Nazarbekov, the founder of the first Islamic University in Kyrgyzstan; and Al-Salam. Each of these organizations has its own framework for *da'wah* and considers it as a major objective.⁶⁹ Yet, many of them serve as humanitarian or educational organizations that sometimes organize lectures for Muslims in both Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Also, while some of them have nationwide representation, others are mainly concentrated in Bishkek.

The SAMK, for example, calls on everyone to participate in *da'wah* and support the *Tablīghī Jamā'āt* movement. Similarly, the Mutakalim opines that *da'wah* is obligatory on everyone and its targeting of women

⁶⁷ Source: State Commission on Religious Affairs, Kyrgyzstan

⁶⁸ Kadyr Malikov, *Muslim Community in Kyrgyzstan: Social Activity at the Present Stage* (Bishkek: Al Salam, 2011), 18.

⁶⁹ Interview: Bilal Ajy Saypiev, Deputy Director of the *Da'wah* Department, SAMK, Bishkek, 02/10/2014

who form the social bedrock of the society enhances the effectiveness of their *da'wah*.⁷⁰ This call makes Muslim media men and women also stakeholders to Islamic *da'wah*. However, the main channel for uninterrupted *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan is the traditional Islamic religious platform known as *Khutbah* which, according to Hussain, is an “excellent channel of Islamic *da'wah*” which attracts congregations every week.⁷¹ Friday sermons at mosques remain one of the effective modes of *da'wah*, since the congregants not only listen to these sermons but also get the opportunity to interact with each other and familiarize themselves with the religious tenets.

The Islamic organizations perceive the mass media as an effective tool for reaching-out to the people. The SAMK, for example, acknowledges that the mass media plays a significant role in disseminating information about Islam. Thus, it does its *da'wah* through the mediums of books, newspapers, journals and booklets. It also has radio and television programmes in which documentaries and short films are broadcast for the benefit of the public. It has a website for teaching Islam. Round-table conferences and workshops are some of their routines for discussing Islamic themes. Since all these mediums are part of the mass media, it is apparent that *da'wah* is already active in the mass media.

In spite of the above, Ilyaz Nazarbekov thinks that the mass media is a weapon of *Shayṭān*, perhaps due to its impact on the people. Nonetheless, he also opines that, it cannot be neglected in *da'wah* because it is one of the ways to defeat the same *Shayṭān*.⁷² Generally, it appears the electronic broadcasting media has not caught much attention as a means of *da'wah*. The organizations have been sluggish in pushing Islamic programmes into the frontline of TV or Radio. Even so, the Sunnat, produces a weekly programme titled: *Amanat Muras* in the form of a monologue on Star TV which lasts about an hour and addresses specific issues of concern to Muslims. This programme is broadcast free of charge by Star TV while Ilyaz Nazarbekov, the Director of Sunnat, and the sole presenter is responsible for the content of the programme. The Centre for Religion, Law, and Politics also facilitated the broadcast of the programme entitled, *Islam and Democracy*, on the private radio, Manas Janyrygy.

⁷⁰ Interview: Zurah Shambetova, Member, Mutakalim, Bishkek, 18/09/2014

⁷¹ M.Y. Hussain, “The Friday *Khutbah* as a Channel of Islamic *Da'wah*”, in M.Y. Hussain, ed. (pp.91-98), *Reading in Islamic Da'wah* (Kuala-Lumpur: IIUM press, 2009), 91.

⁷² Interview: Ilyaz Nazarbekov, Director, Sunnat, Bishkek, 18/10/2014

Adep Bashaty does not have any Islamic programmes on these media. However, it produces and distributes video and audio CDs with information on Islam.

Other organizations are clandestinely involved in the mass media and their personnel serve in some programmes as guest speakers. For example, the Director of *Da'wah* of the SAMK, has worked closely with the media since 2000 by collaborating with Azattyk Plus, Maral Radio, Birinchi Radio, Kyrgyz Radio and, particularly, OTRK where he is an important stakeholder of the popular programme, *Kundun temasy* ("Topic of the Day").⁷³ The SAMK has been granting interview to and often participates in TV or Radio talk-shows. Members of Mutakalim also contribute to radio programmes when invited. The leader of Mutakalim, Jamal Frontbek kyzy, grants interviews to different channels at least once in a week.⁷⁴ The Director of the analytical centre, "Religion, Law and Politics", Kadyr Malikov, is one of the esteemed religious personalities in the media in Kyrgyzstan. The Adep Bashaty does not seem to attract media attention per se possibly because, as a charitable organization, the media sees its involvement as a means of advertisement. Thus, they might wish to charge money before covering their events.⁷⁵

From the above, one realized that there is some interface between the *da'wah* groups and the mass media. Although much of the involvement above revolves around programmes that might not be *da'wah* per se, yet, as clerics with active knowledge of socio-religious welfare in their true sense, their speeches would be ethically-guarded which, for all intents and purposes, is the hallmark of *da'wah*. The Islamic organizations are in an open interaction with the media and since these channels have a large audience, as role models in society, the moral impact of these speakers on the audience cannot be underestimated. Hence, the power of these channels would facilitate a sort of *da'wah* interface in which these clerics speak for and to the Muslims and indirectly to the non-Muslims. These airtimes are allocated free of charge. However, that 'free cake' comes with it the obligation for restriction in which the managers decide what to discuss during the programme. The channels have to decide on hot topics that are unleashing challenges significant enough to attract listeners or viewers'

⁷³ Interview: Ravshanbek Aji Eratov, Director, *Da'wah* Department, SAMK, Bishkek, 02/10/2014

⁷⁴ Interview: Shambetova

⁷⁵ Interview: Jumadyl Mamatjanov, Director, Adep Bashaty, Bishkek, 16/10/2014

attention. These include terrorism, extremism, and *Jihād*. For example, a survey was conducted on the content of 162 articles in the 2010-2011 online archives of three independent media houses: Aziya-Plus, 24.kg and Azattyk. According to the findings, 36% of the articles either treated Islam as a threat to state security or questioned the aim of the Islamic organizations.⁷⁶ Thus, clearly, those Islamic religious experts are often invited to those programmes to discuss Islam in the context of its being a threat to the state. Hence, in these programmes, other people could feature who might not be religious experts per se but security experts who might approach the issues from a secular or agnostic point of view to cloud their religious content.

Nonetheless, the organizations are also blamable because they do not seem to be interested in media attention always. For example, the SAMK is sometimes reluctant in participating in Marva TV's programmes.⁷⁷ In 2005, when the Manas Janyrygy TV began the co-transmission of the Marva TV Islamic programme, the SAMK was invited for the production of Islamic programmes at free airtime but, it appears the '*Ulamā*' at the time were mainly interested in expanding the infrastructure and not *da'wah* in the media.⁷⁸ Hence, for the media houses, the Islamic organizations have not been proactive in terms of reaching out to the people.⁷⁹

Challenges of Using the Mass Media: The Islamic Groups Speak

It appears that, the sluggish patronage of TV and radio for *da'wah* emanates from lack of finance, poor management and the unstable political administration. These problems could be the main causes of the disinterest in media *da'wah*. For some of the organizations, including the Mutakalim, although the government does not interfere in their activities, it does not also show any financial commitment towards them.⁸⁰ The operation of the broadcasting media is a complicated process that is capital intensive. Thus, although the Islamic organizations might wish to exploit this facility for

⁷⁶ David Montgomery & John Heathershaw, "Islam, Secularism, and Danger: A Reconsideration of the Link between Religiosity, Radicalism, and rebellion in Central Asia" (Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Boston, MA, November 24).

⁷⁷ Interview: Kanatbek Matmuratov, Producer, Marva TV, Bishkek, 06/10/2014

⁷⁸ Interview: Temir Toktagaziev, Director, Manas Janyrygy, Bishkek, 20/11/2014

⁷⁹ Interview: Beishenbek Bekeshov, Deputy Director, EL-TR, Bishkek, 04/11/2014

⁸⁰ Interview: Sardar Sagyraeva, Member, Mutakalim, Bishkek, 18/09/2014

da'wah, yet, its accompanied financial obligations stifle their efforts and restrict them to the less expensive media platforms like the internet, audio and video disks, booklets and newspapers. Thus, even though the broadcast media remains not fully exploited, almost all the organizations have their websites and issue newspapers or magazines.

Al-Salam, for example, was founded in order to publish a newspaper, *Islam Nuru* (The Light of Islam), the first issue of which appeared in 2004. This newspaper was established for the purpose of *da'wah*. The Director observes that:

At that time, there was no Islamic media, the only newspaper that covered Islam was *Islam Madanyaty* [meaning: “The Culture of Islam”] which was published by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Since this organization is loyal to the state authority, they did not raise many issues that concerned the Muslims. We wanted to publish a newspaper which would be free from government interferences.⁸¹

The content of this newspaper was comprehensive and diverse. One volume could cover issues about *taubah* (repentance), *'Imān* and many others. It also presents the opinions of influential scholars (usually of *Salafi* fame) on topical issues about both Muslims and non-Muslims. It sometimes provides space for debates between some Muslims and the Tengrist ideologues. Nonetheless, *Islam Nuru* newspaper did not enjoy any foreign funding but its own internally generated income. The newspaper circulated only 2500 copies per issue released monthly and sold at places around mosques. However, the readership was not enough to financially sustain it and it closed-down in 2012⁸² leading Al-Salam into oblivion. The Mutakalim, the SAMK, Adep Bashaty and Muslim Youth also use the print media for *da'wah*. However, unlike the first two organizations that publish newspapers, the last two publish Islamic books.

The above financial constraints seemingly restrict the others to the medium of the internet. The preference of these media outlets could, possibly, be due to poor management. Internet information does not require constant updates and dependence on other institutions unlike radio and TV programmes in which an organization has to collaborate with the existing media houses before simple messages could reach the audience. Even when

⁸¹ Interview: Shamsudeen Abdykalyk uulu, Director, As-Salam, 06/01/2015

⁸² *ibid.*

it establishes collaboration, it has to compete for audience while further fulfilling the specific content requirement of the producers. All these processes require financial commitments and management expertise that might be far from the practical reach of most of the *da'wah* organizations. The Adep Bashaty, for example, finds itself incapable of producing Islamic programmes regularly.⁸³ It is for similar reason that *Islam Madanyaty*, a SAMK newspaper, ceased operation in 2013.

Perhaps, the frequent change of the central religious head, the *Mufti*, is another reason why the SAMK is unable to fully utilize the broadcasting media for *da'wah*. A frustrated staff stated that:

Our *Mufti* is changed almost every year. We want to produce the programmes in which we can teach Islam, or make short-documentaries about Islam. However, because of the frequent change of the *Mufti* we cannot implement our plans. Just after we devise a plan for producing Islamic programmes, the change of government occurs [and a new head would be appointed who might come with his own priorities], and we have to start everything all over again.⁸⁴

Established in 1996, the SAMK has been administered by several *Muftis*. The third *Mufti*, Murataly Ajy Jumanov, resigned from his post in 2010 after he was kidnapped and tortured by hoodlums during a revolution. Since then, Kyrgyzstan has seen several *Muftis*. After Jumanov, Abdyshukur Narmatov, replaced him as *Mufti* but he vacated office after a week for unclear reasons. Suiun Ajy Kuluev took-over as the new *Mufti* but was also physically assaulted by another gang forcing him to give-up the post immediately. The next *Mufti*, Ruslan Jumagulov, stayed for only three months and was dismissed by the Council of '*Ulamā*. This Council appointed Chubak Ajy Jalilov as the new *Mufti*. He had also served barely two years when he was harassed for perceived financial fraud in the management of *Hajj*.⁸⁵ Then came Rahmatullah Egemberdiev who served until 2014 when he also gave up the office following some scandal he was implicated in. This leadership instability seemingly stifles the *da'wah* initiatives of the central religious organizations these *Muftis* head.

⁸³ Interview: Jumadyl Mamatjanov, Director, Adep Bashaty, Bishkek, 16/10/2014

⁸⁴ Interview: Anonymous Staff, SAMK, Bishkek, 02/10/2014

⁸⁵ <http://internet.bibo.kz/295878-utverzhdenie-o-nelegitimnosti-nakhozhdeniya.html>, 02/02/2015

Another problem is conservative attitudes and unwillingness to accept new challenges. The organizations prefer direct interaction with the people. Indeed, the traditional face-to-face method of *da'wah* enhances interpersonal communication in which a feedback could be received. Television or radio presentation is a very challenging endeavour and a few people might be comfortable imagining themselves being viewed or listened to on the screen or the wave, respectively. In TV or radio presentations, one imagines being listened to by all calibre of people. Thus, depending on one's level of learning, one might not be comfortable commenting on complex religious issues. Otherwise, funding might really not be a serious drawback per se because many Islamic organizations are externally funded based on short-term or long-term contracts. Depending on satisfactory investment, these contracts could be extended. Therefore, they possibly look for avenue that could fetch them tangible results to impress their sponsors, hence, the massive investment in the building of Mosques and schools. They could use these projects as evidence of progress to solicit more funds. For that reason, it appears the investment in the media *da'wah* is considered as a "waste" of financial resources since they cannot use it as evidence of productivity. Therefore, the Islamic organizations do not invest in the production of Islamic programmes.⁸⁶

Other organizations are just not interested in the mass media. For example, the *Da'wah* Department of the SAMK thinks that the effort of *Tablighi Jamā'āt* is enough to convey Islam to people. For them, "a religion must be spread by 'foot'. People would follow you if you interact with them directly. This is the *Sunnah*. We have to cherish it like the apple of our eyes."⁸⁷ Only two leaders of the seven Islamic organizations were interested in patronizing the mass media for *da'wah*. Among them was Shamsudeen Abdykalyk uulu, who actually established his organization for the promotion of Islam through the media which he backed with a newspaper. However, most of the articles in this newspaper were solely written by him. Thus, when he was engaged with another work, the newspaper collapsed.

The above problem, which seems to be common to all the Islamic organizations, is due to lack of structured centralized management systems. Many of the organizations are solely managed by their leaders. Therefore, they have no effective professional structure or framework. The

⁸⁶ Interview: Kanatbek Matmuratov, Producer, Marva TV, Bishkek, 06/10/2014

⁸⁷ Interview: Bilal Ajy Saypiev, Deputy Director, *Da'wah* Department, SAMK, Bishkek, 02/10/2014

organizations run only when the leaders are available. Therefore, for example, if Ilyaz Nazarbekov passes away tomorrow, Sunnat will possibly collapse. This was the case of Al-Salam; when its leader was engaged with another work, both the paper and the organization folded-up. Perhaps, such is the situation of the SAMK which platform of actions dissipates once a *Muftī* is removed from office.

Conclusion

This paper examined the image of the media as a facility for *da'wah* in Kyrgyzstan. The objective was to assess the level of cooperation between the *da'wah* groups and the mass media focusing on the traditional electronic media (TV and radio). The digital media factor in the 21st century religious propagation has gained currency and come to stay in apparent satisfaction of the digital generation (D-gen) or (inter)net generation (N-gen) because the new generation audience has become highly interested in technology to the extent that it has become an integral mode of communication which Islamic preachers worldwide have left no stone unturned in taking advantage of. However, in Kyrgyzstan, it was found that, in the first place, the conservative approach to *da'wah* which facilitates face-to-face interaction still seems to be a preferred mode. Nonetheless, the Islamic organizations are aware of the influence of the mass media and the benefit they could derive from its use as a facility for *da'wah*. Thus, the print media such as newspaper, magazine, books and more importantly, the new media, i.e. the internet, have somehow been exploited for *da'wah*. Nonetheless, TV and radio have not gained the desired attention. Nonetheless, with a minimal measure of success, it has also been exploited albeit sluggishly. That the sluggish pace of its patronage emanates from lack of finance and proper management, frequent change of leadership, lack of well-defined organizational framework. Others include: perceived difficulties in receiving feedback; lack of personal interest and practical expertise; and personalized management by the leaders. Our main conclusion, therefore, is that in Kyrgyzstan, the mass media is undoubted in its capability to influence the people's minds. Yet, the broadcast media is not fully and effectively exploited by the *da'wah* experts in the country as compared to other parts of the Muslim world. It is, therefore, recommended that it should be fully exploited effectively for *da'wah*.



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