

Value Determinism Theory in Mass Communication: Assessment of a New Non-Western Rooting Paradigm for Studying Media Phenomena

نظرية الحتمية القيمية في الإعلام: تقييم نموذج تأصيلي غير غربي جديد
لدراسة الظواهر الإعلامية

Théorie du déterminisme par les valeurs en communication de masse : évaluation d'un nouveau paradigme originelle non-occidentale pour l'étude des phénomènes médiatiques

KAMAL HAMIDOU

College of Arts and Sciences - Qatar University

Introduction

As a relatively new disciplinary field, mass communication science's foundations only emerged in the United States of America in the early twentieth century, first within the context of public opinion research (Pooley 2008,45)¹ and then with Laswell's communication model. Early approaches were dominated by the assumption that the media exert a strong and persuasive influence on individuals (Curran et al., 1982, 6)² Encompassed under the names "The Magic Bullet Approach" and the 'Hypodermic Needle Approach', this stream of research suffered from the speculative character that dominated the work of its theorists. Thus, mass communication science suffered from a deficit of legitimacy (Pooley 2008, 44)³ until the founding fathers (Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Lasswell and Hoveland) developed the first empirical approaches that would give the mass communication sciences their empirical foundations in the 1940s. Communication research in the modern sense of the term is therefore essentially American, but to this basis Europeans researchers have added linguistic empiricism and the structural linguistic tradition through the

1 Pooley, J. (2008). *The New History of Mass Communication Research. In History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, edited by David Park and Jefferson Pooley, 43–69. New York: Peter Lang.

2 Curran, J., Gurevitch, M. & J. Woollacott, J. (1982). *The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches. In Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, 11–29. New York: Methuen and Co.

3 Pooley, J. (2008). *The New History of Mass Communication Research. In The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, edited by David Park and Jefferson Pooley, 43–69. New York: Peter Lang.

contributions of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure and the French linguist Roland Barth, as well as the cultural studies contributions launched in the 1950s in the United Kingdom. European researchers have also contributed to the literature through critical theory, which remains a normative approach at the opposite end of the American empirical and largely functionalist approach. The European scholars have based their sweeping generalisations on history and philosophy, using speculation (critical theorists) or empiricism (structural linguistic theorists); both approaches regard the media as having a direct and powerful effect on individuals.

In developing countries that were (at the time of the advent of mass communication) under colonisation or under a protectorate, it was only in the 1960s (after independence) that the majority of these countries became interested in specialties and/or institutes of journalism and communication. However, although politically independent, most of these countries have strictly adopted the educational programs and the epistemological, philosophical and methodological frameworks inherited from their former colonial or protectorate academic systems (Ayish 2003, 80)⁴ Hence, the developing world's scholars have in the majority applied the same methodological tools and the same theoretical frameworks and concepts used in Western countries, even though the sociological, economic, political and ideological characteristics and variables are different in these countries to those existing in the West. Thus, most of the research in developing countries has used the four dominant approaches elaborated in the Western world: namely, the empirical approach from the United States of America, the structural approach from France, the critical approach initiated by German scholars, and the cultural studies approach from the United Kingdom. However, a few Arab, Asian and African scholars have tried to make new contributions to the existing literature and theories. All of them have pointed out the inadequacy of Western theories, as well as their inability to explain phenomena related to societies that belong to different cultural, social and political spheres than those of Western countries. For instance, in a colloquium held by UAE University in 1984, scholars from 14 Arab universities deplored the intensive use of Western textbooks in mass communication undergraduate and graduate programs, expressing the need to see the development of authentic textbooks bearing a vision more closely related to the reality of Arab societies (Tash 1984,137)⁵ In a similar vein,

4 Ayish, M. (2003). Beyond Western-Oriented Communication Theories A Normative Arab-Islamic Perspective, *Javnost - The Public*, 10:2, 79- 92, DOI: 10.108013183222.2003.11008829/.

5 Tash, A. (1984). Media Arab Studies: From Imitation to Originality. *Conference of Mass Communication Departments in Arab Universities*, UAE University, Al Ain: 114-120.

several Arab and Muslim scholars have called for a de-Westernisation of media theories. They deplore the egocentrism of Western theories, their biases and the non-suitability of their methods for dealing with the cultural specificities of the Arab and/or Muslim World, as well as the lack of understanding in Western theories of the values, belief systems and communication models of other areas of the world (Khabany 1993, 1)⁶ Therefore, beginning in the 1970s, many Arab and Muslim scholars have emerged as flagbearers of an essentialist attempt to provide authentic theoretical frameworks to approach media phenomena in their regions. Of note are Hamid Mowlana, Abdulrahman Azzi, Syed Pasha, Ayish Mohamed, Abdulkader Tash and Basyouni Hamada. However, not all of these contributions reach the required level of internal epistemological integration and have sufficient conceptual and methodological frameworks to be recognised as new theories or paradigms.

In this article, we explore one of the rare contributions that can claim to be a theory: namely, Value Determinism Theory in the Media (VDT), originated by Professor Abderrahmane Azzi, an Algerian scholar specialising in mass communication. Our aim is to discuss this theory's theoretical and methodological foundations, its concepts and assumptions, as well as the criticism levelled against its assumptions. The purpose is to highlight and discuss a new theoretical framework proposed by a non-Western scholar, who claims that religious values are a key determinant in understanding media effects. Azzi (2014, 3,4)⁷ points out that Western scholars do not consider the religious variable enough, despite the role of religions in media systems, as well as in cultural and ideological systems. Furthermore, he considers that the Western approaches are marked by an ethnocentrism which does not take into consideration cultural, ideological and religious contexts and parameters other than those in force in Western countries. The Western approaches are, most often, elaborated for more secularised societies, where social norms have a weaker influence on individuals. Azzi (2014, 3,4)⁸ considers, therefore, that Western approaches are not suitable for all societies in all the cases, and that applying their assumptions and methodological tools to non-Western countries might lead to biased conclusions.

6 Khiabany, G. (2003). De-Westernizing Media Theory, or Reverse Orientalism: Islamic Communication as Theorized by Hamid Mowlana. *Journal of Media Culture & Society*, 25,3: 415-422...<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443703025003007/>

7 Azzi, A. (2008). Azzi's Responses to The Questions of Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>. (accessed May 24, 2020).

8 Azzi, A. (2008). Azzi's Responses to The Questions of Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

1. Study Questions

As a normative approach to the study of media, Value Determinism Theory is an alternative theory that proposes a more global framework to analyse the role of media and communication in society. This approach aims to go beyond the ‘reductionist’ notion of technological determinism, as well as beyond the simplistic empirical and functionalist approaches that explain only partially the more complex realities related to media and communication phenomena. Although the theory has aroused great debate and many reactions in the Arab academic world, from both followers and detractors, VDT remains relatively unknown in the Western academic milieu. The purpose here is to expose the assumptions, fundamentals and concepts of VDT, by posing four study questions:

- What are the fundamental scientific and epistemological elements of VDT?
- What are its assumptions and its key concepts?
- What criticisms did the theory received from its detractors and followers?
- What challenges does the theory need to overcome to establish itself as a recognised mass communication theory?

2. Literature Review

Only a few Western academic papers have addressed VDT, due to the fact that the theory is only relatively well known in Western academia. In contrast, many contributors in the Arab world have devoted work to this controversial theory as it continually gains ground and arouses debate about its scientific nature. The most important Western scholar who has recognised VDT is the American scholar Clifford G. Christians. In his recent book *Media Ethics in the Digital Age*, he classified VDT in his section of theories of global human dignity that included Immanuel Kant’s theory from within the Western context, as well as Paulo Freire and K’ang Fu-Tzu’s theories from outside the Western context. Christians’ work focuses on the value of justice in an international context by relying on philosophical propositions as well as on moral theories from Aristotle to the Theory of Ethics of Social Cohesion. Christians (2019) states in his book that justice requires equity in listening to non-Western cognitive and ethical voices. In his assessment of VDT, Christians writes: “Professor Abderrahmane Azzi of the University of Sharjah is the author of the influential ‘Value Determinism Theory of the Media’ (VDT). He states that human dignity is both spiritual and relational in Islamic ethics ... this relational dimension

of dignity involves human beings' perception of one another as entities that deserve respect and honour, and special care and attention for others, in their capacity, as indicated by Immanuel Kant, as ends in themselves" (Christians 2019)⁹ This opinion from a scholar of the weight of Christians contributes to giving more notoriety to VDT in the Arab world, and opens the door to an introduction of the theory to Western academia.

In the Arab world, many studies have been published on the subject of VDT, ranging from articles, to books, to doctoral or postgraduate theses. The majority of Arab publications dedicated to VDT are intellectual contributions, motivated by the desire to explain and/or popularise VDT. Therefore, these works concentrate on the explanation of the theory as well as on the justification of its concepts and assumptions. Worth mentioning here is the work published by Bouali, one of the followers of Azzi, entitled *Studies in the theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought* (Bouali 2018)¹⁰ In this work, Bouali endeavours to interpret the different stages of the theory from its appearance in the 1980s. In the first three chapters, Bouali tries to demonstrate the epistemological cohesion and integration of the theory. Then he explains how to understand the theory from a structural and semiotic perspective. In the third chapter, he embarks on an intellectual effort to explain how to understand value determinism in media. In this book, Bouali also identifies the main intellectual contributions that formed the intellectual foundations of the theory both from the modern sociology perspective and from the Arabic and Islamic heritage perspective. *Readings in the Value Determinism Theory in the Media*, is another work dedicated to the popularisation and explanation of VDT. In this book, Bouali and other scholars from the Middle East & North Africa region (MENA) such as Boumaiza, Galandar, Abdalli, Azzouz, Al Kareem, Labdjiri and Bouakkaz embark on an epistemological effort to demonstrate the originality of the theory. They do explain its specific view of the concepts of culture and value and justify its usefulness in studying communication phenomena (Bouali et al. 2009)¹¹ For their part, Galandar and Awadh (2019)¹² devote a great part of their book *Research Trends in Communication Sciences, a Re-*

9 Clifford, C. (2019). *Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age*. Cambridge University Press. Doi:10.1017/9781316585382.

10 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution.

11 Bouali, N., Boumaiza, S., Galandar M., Abdalli A., Azzouz, H., Al Kareem M., Labdjiri, N., & Bouakkaz, D. (2009). *Readings in the Value Determinism Theory in the Media*. Constantine, Algeria: Iqraa Publication Library.

12 Galandar, M, Babker M.A. (2009). *Research Trends in Communication Science, a Re-rooting Look*. Beirut: Dar Al Fikr Al Muaser. 19.

rooting Look to VDT. The two authors argue that Azzi's approach provides a valuable effort toward a new understanding of mass communication sciences, arguing that the theory gives the sciences a dimension that Western scholars have ignored knowingly or unknowingly. They also highlight that Azzi's study is the first courageous approach that does not completely eliminate dealing with Western heritage, but does not consider it as its final reference either (...). It even uses some structural and phenomenological concepts; this approach makes the values of society the basis for the whole intellectual construction, considering religion as the source of those values (Galandar and Awadh, 2009)¹³

In addition to books, many journal papers have been published with a special focus on VDT's concepts and theoretical framework. Of note is Ghouti's study entitled "Value Determinism Theory in the Media: The Relationship Between the Normative Framework and Empirical Studies". In this paper, Ghouti (2017)¹⁴ focuses on the empirical tools proposed by VDT in order to apply its framework to the study of values. In another paper entitled "Alienation and Media Imaginary: Reading in the Effects of the Media", Ghouti applies VDT concepts and perspectives to demonstrate how Western media values carried by imported media contents may lead to the alienation and enculturation of local indigenous societies. This happens through a process of weakening of cultural prohibitions, which reduces the focus on the local for the benefit of the global and the encouragement of compliance in global uniformity (Ghouti 2016)¹⁵

For his part, Zaoui (2016)¹⁶ endeavours in his article "Value Determinism and Dialectical Determinism to Confront the Media Mediocrity: An Analytical Approach" to explain how the framework proposed by VDT acts in complementarity with the dialectical framework proposed by Karl Marx. This correlation is considered especially with regard to Marx's notion of conflict between contrasting binaries. In another contribution, "A Model for the Value Determinism Theory in the Media", Soufi (2014)¹⁷ begins by exploring the main theoretical framework and concepts of VDT, before embarking on an

13 Galandar, M, Babker M.A. (2009). 2009. *Research Trends in Communication Science, a Re-rooting Look*. Beirut: Dar Al Fikr Al Muaser. 19.

14 Ghouthi, A.A. (2017). Value Determinism Theory in the Media: The Relationship Between the Normative Framework and the Empirical Studies. *International Journal of Social Communication* 4 (19): 57–80.

15 Ghouthi A. (2016). Alienation and Media Imaginary: Reading in the Effects of the Media. *Al Hikmah Journal of Communication and Information Studies* 8: 90–105.

16 Zaoui, D. (2016). Value Determinism and Dialectical Determinism to Confront Media Mediocrity: an Analytical Approach. *Al Hikmah Journal of Communication and Information Studies* 3: 169–183.

17 *al Sciences* 3 (1): 280–311.

effort to formulate some models for VDT based on the different thought and methodological tools proposed by Azzi and his disciples. In a recent paper, “New Ethics and Digital Dilemmas: Towards a New Normative Reflection”, Benamra (2018)¹⁸ dedicates a large part of his article to VDT, presenting it as a possible solution to media ethics dilemmas faced by both traditional and new media. He highlights that VDT is a normative approach with a deontological and ethical perspective that assesses the quality of communicative action and media performance based on the action’s and the content’s adherence to ethical standards, common sense morality and on its accordance with societal and cultural value systems, including religious standards. It is also worth mentioning a paper published by Labdjiri (2014)¹⁹ entitled “The Value Dimension of Advertisements: An Analytical Study in the Light of VDT Theory”. In this contribution, the author tries to apply VDT concepts and framework to the study of a sample of advertisements circulated in the Algerian newspaper Al Khabar. One of the objectives of the author is to provide VDT with methodological tools in order to demonstrate that it is a valid theory with valid methodology by demonstrating its ability to be concretely applied to the study of media phenomena. Among the rare critical studies that have been published on VDT, mention should be made of Aissaoui’s “A Critical and Analytical View of the Value Determinism Theory in The Media”. In this paper, the author highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, especially with regard to the unintended dependency of its methodological tools on the Western legacy (Aissaoui 2014)²⁰

Out of the Algerian contributions interested in VDT in the Arab World, of note is the study published by Abu Al Hamam (from Jordan) entitled “The Value Approach in Western and Arab Communication Theories: The Uses and Gratification Entry & the VDT Theory” (Abu Al Hamam 2017)²¹ In this paper, the author compares the main concepts of VDT with the Uses & Gratification approach, as well as their methodological tools. He also highlights the values in each approach and some insufficiencies of the methods used in each of them. In addition to the journal papers and various works dedicated to the

18 Benamra, B.A. (2018). New Ethics and Digital Dilemmas: Towards a New Normative Reflection. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 26–45.

19 Labdjiri, N. (2014). Value Dimension in Advertisements: An Analytical Study in the Light of the VDT Theory. *Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (3): 322–349.

20 Aissaoui, A. (2014). A Critical and Analytical View of the Value Determinism Theory in The Media. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3 (1): 183–199.

21 Abu Al Hamam, A. (2017). Value Approach in Western and Arab Communication Theories: The Uses and Gratification Entry & the VDT Theory. *International Journal of Social Communication* 4 (9): 97–120.

explanation and popularisation of the theory already mentioned, there are many other papers and theses whose authors have chosen to use VDT as a theoretical framework for their intellectual contributions. In his paper “Al Jazeera Advocacy and Media Value Determinism: Re-conceptualizing the Network’s Coverage of the Arab Spring Revolutions”, Galandar uses VDT as a theoretical framework to investigate Al Jazeera’s news coverage of the Arab Spring in order to demonstrate the existence of what he calls “a style of coverage that may be qualified as socioreligious based brand and advocacy journalism” (Galandar 2013)²² Furthermore, many graduate students have used VDT as a theoretical framework for their doctoral or master’s theses. Of note are Doghman’s thesis entitled “Social Networks and Values: An Exploratory Study on Facebook Users” (Doghman 2007)²³, and Boumediene’s thesis entitled “Television and Value System: An Analytical Study of F24 Arabic Channel from the VDT perspective (Boumediene 2016)²⁴ In addition, Graynia uses the VDT theoretical framework in her thesis entitled “The Role Receiver’s Values in Interpreting Drama Values” (Graynia 2018)²⁵, as does the thesis defended by Memmou entitled “The Effect of TV Drama on Algerian Youths: Turkish Drama as a Model” (Memmou 2018)²⁶

What characterises all the works mentioned above is their tendency to consider VDT as a valorous theory that has dared to propose a model of analysis different to the Western models. Eager to see the emergence of a local theory which takes into consideration the cultural and religious specificities of Arab/Muslim societies, the majority of scholars have manifested a clear bias in favour of VDT by seeking to justify its scientific relevance and find the methodological tools lacking at its inception.

3. VDT Assumptions and Theoretical Framework

Value Determinism Theory is considered by a number of Arab and Muslim media scholars to be an alternative to the rigid mathematical model of communication, which is an almost robotic model with a forced exclusion of the social, religious, cultural and ideological representations in which the

22 Galandar, M. (2013). Al Jazeera Advocacy and Media Value Determinism: Re-conceptualizing the Network’s Coverage of the Arab Spring Revolutions. *Global Media Journal* 4: 1–17.

23 Doghman, H. (2007). Social Networks and Values: An Exploratory study on Facebook Users. *University of Algiers* 3.

24 Boumediene, K. (2016). *Television and Value System: An Analytical Study of F24 Arabic Channel from the VDT Perspective*. Mostaghanem University.

25 Graynia, W. (2018). Receiver’s Values Role in Interpreting Drama Values. *University of Algiers* 3.

26 Memmou, S. (2018). The Effect of TV Drama on Algerian Youths: The Turkish Drama as a Model. *University of Algiers* 3.

communication process is founded (Brahimi 2019, 313)²⁷ It is also seen as an alternative to the technology determinism approach proposed by McLuhan, who argues that the message is the medium, as VDT considers the value to be the message (Bouali 2018, 31)²⁸ VDT is a normative framework with a structuralist orientation that postulates that the moral value systems and symbolic systems that affect societies shape their media outputs (Galandar 2013, 5). VDT is in line with multiple efforts made to moralise the media environment, from Robert Hutchins and his followers of Social Responsibility Theory at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the efforts made recently by Christians Clifford in his Communitarian Media Ethics Theory or his Ethics of Being Theory. However, VDT is distinguished from major Western theories by the fact that it has its own intellectual perspective that dares to take the religious factor as a determining factor. The theory takes a broader approach to dealing with media phenomena by considering that it is impossible to explain reality only by the tangible aspects, as proposed by empirical researchers.

In fact, Azzi (Azzi 2018, 40)²⁹ believes in the primacy of value over the positive or the real, because the positive and the real might be distorted if they move away from value. It is in this aspect that Azzi's approach differs from Western-dominant approaches, which are entirely secular in their nature and presume that the individual is a small independent rational entity. These Western dominant conceptions are formulated apart from any spiritual dimension that acts as the superego in guiding individual's decisions. Azzi (Azzi 2018, 37-38)³⁰ deplores the fact that with the secularisation of values, moral issues have become relative and without supreme reference since each individual has his own vision and his own norms to distinguish ethical and moral acts from those that are not.

Azzi (Azzi 2018, 37)³¹ considers that the source of value is spiritual, although its daily treatment by individuals is done by means of conscious and renewed rational approach. Furthermore, value, in its immanence, stems from

27 Brahimi, B. (2019). Value Determinism Theory of Dr. Abderrahman Azzi: Between the Structural Model and the Monographic Proposal. *Journal of Islamic Sciences and Civilization* 4 (2): 319–329.

28 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution. 31.

29 Azzi, A. (2018). Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 08–42.

30 Azzi, A. (2018). Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 08–42.

31 Azzi, A. (2018). Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 08–42.

a cultural and civilisational frame of reference. Azzi (Azzi 2003)³² defines moral value as the supreme level in any cultural system. He postulates that culture is a scale in which the moral value is at the highest level and highlights that moral value is what elevates an individual to moral status. The basic source of moral value, Azzi argues, is religion, because human beings cannot be the source of values; they are only tools in which values are embodied. Azzi (Azzi 2018, 8-42)³³ postulates that the mission of the media should be value-oriented in its nature. Media carry meaning through traditional or new mediums within a specific social and civilisational context, but the relationship between the informational and the ethical may be limited/disconnected, overlapped, or strong (the last state is rare and is close to the normative one) depending on the nature of the media systems.

VDT supposes that an individual's behaviour in any social system is built on three pillars: moral thought, which is of spiritual emanation; moral conscience, which is of rational emanation; and informational and/or moral action, which is of personal emanation. The more the informational and moral actions are connected to reason and value, the more an individual's behaviour is logical and value oriented.

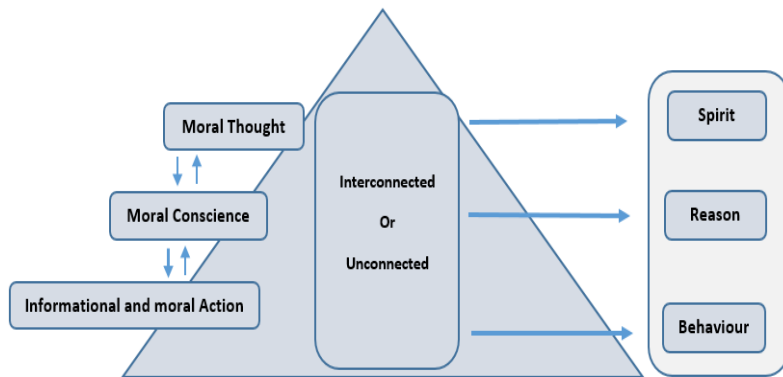


Figure 1: Moral System in Value Determinism Theory³⁴

32 Azzi, A. (2003). *Studies in Value Determinism Theory: Towards A Distinguished Communication Thought*, 1st ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Arab Union Centre for Studies. 10.

33 Azzi, A. (2018). Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 8–42.

34 Azzi, A. (2018). Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 18.

From Azzi's perspective, religion is the central force that elicits the values of society and is an important determinant of the communication process (Galandar 2013, 5)³⁵ In his conceptualising of moral value, Azzi (Azzi 2018, 21)³⁶ is close to Kant's conception of "duty ethics", as he considers Kant's conception to be too similar to the Islamic conception of ethics. This correlation is especially valid with regard to the four basics of Kant's Categorical Imperatives Theory, beginning with the imperative of "morality within" that supposes that morality is innate in every human being. This is followed by the imperative of "universality", which supposes that values should be applicable to all cases in all circumstances. Next is the imperative of the 'duty principle', which supposes that a human being behaves naturally morally, as imposed on him by his own conscience, and finally the imperative of 'humanism', which means that every human being supposes humanity in the other when he deals with him.

The value determinism approach is based on the assumption that the media contributes deeply in shaping the 'moral imaginary' of societies. The media's importance derives from the fact that they are an 'imaginary system' that goes beyond the reductive empirical approach that considers media as just an information system or as a simple consumption system. Media systems operate as a central force with other imaginary systems, and they all operate together within a specific social system and reality (Bouali 2018, 29)³⁷

Starting from the previous postulations, we can summarise the assumptions of VDT in five major hypotheses:

1. Religion is a central determinant that shapes collective and individual values in societies, including those of media professionals; therefore, it affects media and communication contents /processes.
2. Symbolic systems (religion, culture, ideology, etc.) are normative in societies; therefore, media's effects on people cannot be apprehended outside the symbolic systems in which they operate.
3. The value of an action tends to decay as long as the media moves away from value due to the logics of profit and secularism within the dominance of the 'visible' imaginary.
4. Media messaging is primarily a value that carries meaning in a specific social and cultural context; the source of the value is originally spiritual, but its approach is through rational, conscious and renewed interpretation.

35 Galandar, M. (2013). Al Jazeera Advocacy and Media Value Determinism: Re-conceptualizing the Network's Coverage of the Arab Spring Revolutions. *Global Media Journal* 4: 1–17.

36 Azzi, A. 2018. Ethics System & Media System: A Reading on Contemporary Scientific Trends. *International Journal of Social Communication* 5 (3): 21.

37 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed. 29.

5. Value can be either of a positive emanation or of a negative emanation, depending on whether the act of communication contains the spiritual precepts from which it is supposed to be inspired or has freed itself from them.

Azzi's VDT perspective is based on his specific understanding of the concept of culture; he rejects the dominant Western conception, which is based more on the anthropological or on the sociological perspectives that reduce culture to only its physical aspects, either in its material, technical or artistic manifestations (Galandar 2009, 19)³⁸ For Azzi (2003,106-107)³⁹, the concept of culture is broader and refers to a reality that encompasses the past, present and future, as well as the civilisational dimension in which moral values play a central role. Indeed, Azzi defines culture as all that society carries (the past), that which it produces in terms of values or moral and material symbols (present and future), its interaction with time (history) and place (surrounding the past of that social system), based on major foundations (values) that constitute the nation's constants and origins (the civilisational dimension).

Therefore, the VDT approach proposes a new communication model that puts value at the top of all communication process elements. Azzi added three elements to Laswell's model—the value, the social system and the civilisational dimensions—the eight elements being structurally nested (Bouali 2018, 34)⁴⁰

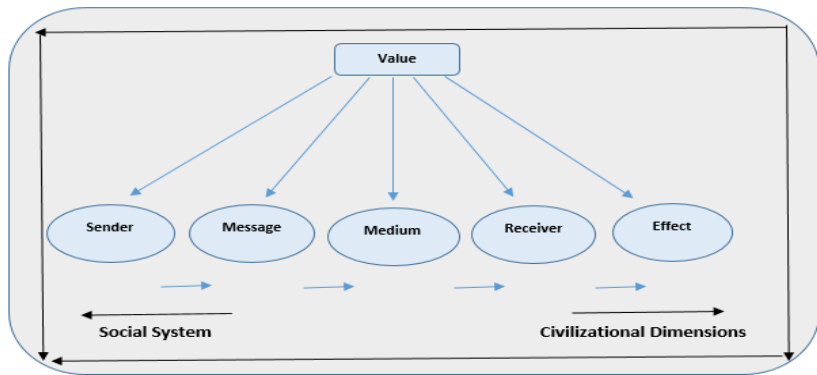


Figure 2: Communication Model in Value Determinism Theory⁴¹

38 Galandar, M, and Babker M.A. (2009). *Research Trends in Communication Science, a Re-rooting Look*. Beirut: Dar Al Fikr Al Muaser. 19.

39 Azzi, A. (2003). *Studies in Value Determinism Theory: Towards A Distinguished Communication Thought*, 1st ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Arab Union Centre of Studies. 10.

40 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed. 34.

41 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed..

By adopting a normative approach based on the binary opposition logic developed by the linguist Ferdinand De Saussure, Azzi divides media outputs into two distinct natures: the positive effects and the negative effects (Bouali, 2018. 40)⁴² The positive effects are all the actions done in compliance with the supreme values existing in the society that contribute to maintaining the social balance and elevating individuals to the state of virtue. The negative effects are all the actions that deviate from the values in force in society, potentially jeopardising social equilibrium, and that distance individuals from virtue.

Table1: Normative Effects of Media Contents According to Value Determinism Theory

Positive Effects	Negative Effects	Binary Opposition Type
Reinforce values	Neutralising values	At the value level
Social education	Weaken opinion leader's roles and thoughts	Social responsibility
Achieve harmony and reinforce social cohesion	Weaken social communication fabric	Customs, traditions & usages
Enlarge benefits from culture	Distort and simplify culture	Cultural structure
Awareness of external world	Reduce surrounding's awareness	General Awareness
Looking at oneself from an outside perspective	Reduce local potentials	Stereotypes
Living in multiple cultures	Medium addiction	Customs & patterns
Gratification	Desensitisation	Moral responsibility
Entertainment	Role playing	Imitation
Self-criticism	Censor self-criticism	Criticism Level
Informing, explaining & analysing	Media Gap	Media role

The second (negative) type of action includes all media contents guided by political, ideological or economical imperatives that might push the media to deviate from the professional ethics and the moral ideals prevalent in the social system.

42 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed. 40.

4. Fundamental Concepts Inherent in Value Determinism Theory

Azzi has developed his own key concepts in order to elaborate VDT's conceptual framework. The new notions and concepts proposed by VDT are not aimed at only contributing to the 'essentialisation' of mass communication theories in the Muslim and Arab worlds, but also to approaching more precisely media phenomena through new concepts that reflect reality more closely and are more suitable to dealing with the Arab and Muslim world realities. Based on this, Azzi has conceptualised the notion of the 'Media Imaginary' as a substitute to the Western "public opinion" notion, because it is more appropriate to the reality of the Arab and Muslim Worlds. Azzi formulated this notion of the Media Imaginary after he noticed some contradictions and insufficiencies in the "public opinion" model. He argues that "public opinion" is considered most of the time in the Western perspective as a static reality within a specific time for a specific social category or specific geographical zone, while the Media Imaginary model describes a moving reality that encompasses the past, the present and the cultural and civilisational dimensions (Azzi 2011, 62-63)⁴³

Azzi defines the Media Imaginary as a generalised psychosocial feeling formed by media contents on the one hand, and on the other hand by what people carry in terms of heritage and mythology, with which historical memory interferes in a distorted manner due to the age of decadence and the colonial phenomenon experienced by many Arab and Muslim countries. It is therefore a combination of the mythical values rooted in people's consciousness and subconsciousness, and the manufactured values diffused via the media. By definition, the form of this imaginary is not static, because it has not yet determined its direction, whether towards preserving reality or changing reality. Azzi divides the notion of the Media Imaginary into two components: the Abstract Media Imaginary and the Authentic Media Imaginary. The Abstract Media Imaginary is a state in which media content symbols and meanings are not part of receivers' sociohistorical reality, but are instead transplanted by the media from foreign contexts. The Authentic Media Imaginary is a state in which media content reflects both the sociohistorical reality of receivers and what media content "ought to be" based on the norms and standards existing in the society.

Another key notion conceptualised by VDT is 'Media Timeframe' vs. 'Value Timeframe' and its negative effects on Arab and Muslim societies specifically.

43 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

According to Azzi, media timeframe is either a value signifier or not; it can be a value signifier only if it reflects the authentic supreme values that emanate from the global religious and cultural framework. Therefore, it might not be a signifier if it is distorted by the extraneous contents of the media and by the alienation resulting from external cultural influences.

Azzi argues that Media Timeframe negatively affects social temporality in Arab and Muslim countries as media contents expose individuals to multiple worlds that move them across time and space. This exposure causes confusion for individuals between the real and the symbolic, which leads to the neutralisation of indigenous value temporality. Azzi considers that the more media temporality is in compliance with indigenous value temporality the more it affects positively the social temporality; however, in the opposite situation, the more it is in deviance from indigenous value temporality the more it produces negative effects on social temporality (Azzi, 2009, 17)⁴⁴

VDT also theorises the notion ‘Media Space’ vs. ‘Belonging Space’. From Azzi’s perspective, Media Space is symbolic geographical areas mediated by communication tools, particularly through visual media tools. It is the symbolic mental image shaped by the media in the collective imaginary of people about the dominant countries in the media industry. For instance, the US life style is largely mediated through Hollywood, cultivating in the global audience an ideal mental image of the country to the detriment of other countries. This symbolic space challenges individuals’ own sense of national belonging as it contributes to disengaging individuals from their own physiological surroundings because of extraneous or alienating media content. These extraneous contents immerse individuals into a symbolic space, which, while being foreign to them, might become a referential world that takes them away from their own physical space, causing a kind of alienation in them.

VDT theorists have also conceptualised the ‘Symbolic Media Capital’ vs. ‘Value Media Capital’. Azzi has extracted this notion from the term “capital” used in its economic sense, but he employs it within a different perspective. He does not refer to the financial aspects exclusively, but refers rather to the actions of those who control the media financially or administratively and build the symbolic world in the media according to their own interests and/or ideologies at different historical stages (Soufi 2014, 292)⁴⁵ Azzi postulates that the symbolic capital in the Arab area has been politically instrumentalised

44 Azzi A. (2009). *Media and the Dislocation of Value Structures in the Arab & Muslim Zone: Knowledge Reading in cultural Deposits*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr.

45 Soufi, C. (2014). A Model for the Value Determinism Theory in the Media. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3 (1): 280–311.

after independence, which gave birth to an authoritarian media system at the beginning. Later on, this capital became relatively free and began to be either neutral/objective (semi-independent media), or entertainment/distractive, giving birth to the sensational media (private independent satellite channels; Bouali 2018, 90)⁴⁶ In both cases, Symbolic Media Capital deviated from value media capital, as authentic value has been excluded from both the political media discourse and from media entertainment programs.

VDT theorists have also forged two other related concepts dealing with the linguistic variable, namely ‘Language Value Structure’ and ‘Media Tongue Violence’. In the first, Azzi postulates that language is never neutral in its nature. He considers that language is not just a tool of communication: it is a means and a message that carries values at the same time (Azzi 2011, 68). In addition to the cultural and civilisational embodied dimensions, language value refers to the grammatical rules that have shaped the language; without these, the language would only be a set of random signs, which would weaken the language over the long term. Media Tongue Violence refers to the deterioration of the language (Azzi 2011, 67)⁴⁷ due to the conscious or unconscious media practices of journalists and animators as well as other media professionals. These actors – in the Arab world specifically – free themselves more and more from grammatical rules and linguistic standards by adopting either dialectical tongues or a semi-classic tongue insufficiently respectful of the grammatical rules: these factors affect media tongue value.

There are two other major VDT concepts forged by Azzi, related in their nature: ‘Value Media Ethics’ and ‘Media Value Path’. The first one refers to Azzi’s conception of the moral and ethical precepts decreed by the Islamic religion, extracted in their majority from Allah’s 99 “most beautiful names” in the Holly Quran. These values must be the compass of every individual and every media professional and are framed by six attributes: faith, honesty, the search for truth, independence, balance and accountability (Azzi 2011, 52)⁴⁸ The second, Media Value Path, refers to the need for media contents to abide with the supreme moral and ethical framework imposed by religion (Azzi 2011, 51)⁴⁹ Within his own original (non-secular) perspective used to consider the role of

46 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed.

47 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

48 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

49 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

media, Azzi has even proposed a new concept to rename the information and communication process by proposing to Arab and Muslim scholars that they use the term 'altabligh' instead of 'communication' or 'information'. Altabligh is an Arabic word with a religious consonance, closer in its meaning to the term "transmitting". Azzi argues that altabligh is more comprehensive than communication or information because, in addition to both of them, it includes in its sense transmitting a value. While informing is just about diffusing news and while communication describes the process of exchanging messages between a sender and a receiver, altabligh is intrinsically related to value and is not subject to timeliness as is the case with news (Azzi 2011, 45)⁵⁰ Azzi also formulated the concept 'Permeability to External Media Dominance' that describes the state where local media disconnects from authentic values and thus contributes to the alienation of a local audience by non-native values, creating a cultural desensitisation that paves the way for external media influence (Azzi 2011, 70)⁵¹

We have explored in this section the major concepts elaborated by Azzi and his disciples in order to provide VDT with its own theoretical and conceptual framework. However, adherents to VDT have proposed many other concepts and notions that we cannot mention here for length considerations. All these concepts and notions aim at demonstrating that VDT has overall internal coherence and that it proposes an epistemological break with the Western theoretical frameworks in dealing with media phenomena in Arab and Muslim countries. However, the theory does not position itself as the antithesis of Western theories; instead, it proposes itself as a complementary approach aimed at responding better to the sociocultural specificities of Arab and Muslim countries. Azzi recognises that he uses western methodological tools himself, although he has gradually and consciously moved away from the theoretical structures of the Western-dominated models (Azzi 2003, 10-11)⁵²

Bouali for his part admits that VDT cohabits with the other media theories in sharing certain positivist and logical aspects. Nevertheless, VDT differs from them in its way of considering value: VDT uses hermeneutics from a value perspective in dealing with media phenomena, while Western theories that are for the most part empirical, use mainly a positive approach (Bouali 2018, 41)⁵³

50 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

51 Azzi, A. (2011). *A Call for an Understanding of New Concepts in Mass Communication*, 1st ed. Tunis: Eddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr/ Bin Rashed Al Maktum Foundation.

52 Azzi, A. (2003). *Studies in Value Determinism Theory: Towards A Distinguished Communication Thought*, 1st ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Arab Union Centre of Studies.

53 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed.

The main concern of VDT is to propose a theoretical framework that deals with media phenomena in Arab and Muslim countries across an ego perspective not from an alter perspective. That being said, Azzi and his followers claim that the theory is universal and valid for other societies regardless of their nature, their cultural components or whatever the preponderance of religion in those societies may be (Bouali, 2018, 42)⁵⁴

5. VDT Methodological Framework and Tools

VDT predominantly uses a structural-functionalist approach in its theoretical framework and a quantitative and qualitative approach in its methodology. In its structuralist approach, it is in line with the logic put forward by Kant, as it suggests that no social fact can be explained in a societal system without being examined within the society's overall structure. The structuralist dimension of VDT is evident in the fact that it postulates the pre-eminence of the whole over the parts, the primacy of relations over elements, and the causal preponderance of structure. The functionalist dimension appears in the fact that VDT considers media systems as dependent variables of a more global system that is constituted by a value pattern system that acts as an independent variable. By using a normative perspective, VDT considers value – which is, let us remember, of a religious emanation in this theory – as a superstructure aimed at guiding other structures in preserving social equilibrium and identity, as well as in ensuring societal system sustainability and achievement of harmonious development.

However, even though it is normative in its global approach, VDT's methodological framework proposes some working tools that are positive in their nature, just as it uses survey studies' tools as well as content analysts' tools in the ways they have been implemented by the American empirical approach and by the European structuralist linguistics approach. Azzi distinguishes between the methodological framework and methodological working tools: the methodological framework is considered to be a specific vision that imposes specific study questions using a specific approach in adherence to the general theoretical framework. On the other hand, he considers methodological working tools only as instruments; even if they might carry theoretical or conceptual components from other theoretical frameworks, they can be effectively used in VDT research if used wisely (Badis 2014, 37)⁵⁵ VDT theory is inductive in its theoretical dimension, structural in its ontological dimension and hermeneutic in

54 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed.
55 Badis, L. (2014). Value Determinism Theory: Towards a Distinct Media Paradigm. *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (March): 17–44.

its epistemological dimension. It is suitable both for qualitative and quantitative studies that deal with the impact of the media on values. Furthermore, VDT's conceptual and methodological frameworks do allow the use of several types of reasoning, such as rational and deductive, deduction with participatory observation, as well as inductive reasoning and empirical approaches.

In the first three decades after the advent of VDT, the theory suffered from a lack of legitimacy because of the absence of clear methodological tools. During this period, Azzi and his disciples focused primarily on the development of the conceptual and theoretical framework of the theory, as well as on providing a rationale for the approach in order to justify its relevance for a local and regional academic audience. This focus was because scholars were reluctant at that time to accept a new normative theoretical framework that had been seen as a hermeneutic emanation in the classic sense of the term. On the other hand, VDT theorists have focused on justifying the rooting of the theory in authentic Arab and Muslim scientific heritage in order to convince scholars about VDT's specificities and to demonstrate its relevance to the specificities of the cultural and civilisational area for which it is intended. However, with the increasing criticism formulated by Arab scholars who highlight VDT's lack of a clear methodological framework, Azzi and his disciples have devoted their efforts over the last two decades to shaping a methodological framework that is still being refined now. Indeed, Azzi and his disciples have elaborated the Abderrahman, Said and Nacir scale (commonly known as the ASN scale) to measure media effects on attitudes and behaviours in order to assess the impact of media on societal values, knowing that the scale is valid both for survey studies and for content analysis.

According to Azzi, the methodological framework of VDT is subject to validity and reliability requirements, similar to any other theory. The validity requirement can be ensured when the researcher formulates questions that are totally in accordance with the framework of the theory. It can also be reached if the researcher is keen to take into account the existence of a strong concordance between the different elements of the research (internal validity) as well as the social and civilisational environment in which the study is conducted (external validity; Azzi 2012, 52-53)⁵⁶ The reliability requirement can be tested by applying VDT's ASN scale to study media value convergence or media value disharmony within the supreme value structure. Furthermore, Azzi believes that reliability can be reached when three different knowledgeable VDT researchers do the

56 Azzi, A. (2012). *Methodology of Media Determinism Theory*, 1st ed. Tunis: Elddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr.

same study and compare the results to show to what extent there is congruence or affinity between the results of the studies (Azzi 2012, 54-55)⁵⁷

The ASN acronym is composed from the first letter of the first names of the three major contributors to the theory, respectively, Abulrahman for Azzi, Said for Boumaiza and Nacir for Bouali. It is composed of twelve indicators starting with faith and including humanism, communication, aesthetics, temporality, politics, space, education, language, economy, as well as the psychological and sociological dimensions (see chart below).

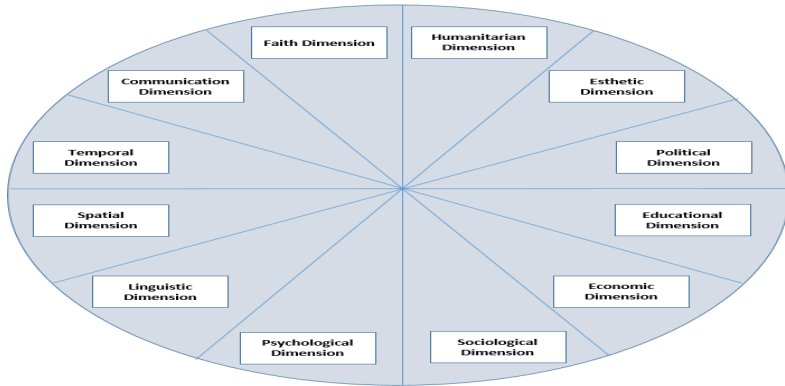


Figure3: VDT's ASN Scale for Media Value Assessing⁵⁸

The scale is proposed as a methodological tool to study to what extent value norms and standards are absent or present in specific media that target large or limited social milieus. It also focuses on understanding to what extent the disseminated values are efficient in their use by media and to what extent they are or are not efficient in achieving their goals on the target audience in a given social milieu (Soufi 2014, 294)⁵⁹ Azzi recommends using Holsti's⁶⁰ equation⁶¹ in order to measure reliability when using this scale with content analysis methodology (Azzi 2012, 54-55)⁶²

57 Azzi, A. (2012). *Methodology of Media Determinism Theory*, 1st ed. Tunis: Elddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr.

58 Azzi, A. (2012). *Methodology of Media Determinism Theory*, 1st ed. Tunis: Elddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr.66.

59 Soufi, C. (2014). A Model for the Value Determinism Theory in the Media. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3 (1): 280–311.

60 Holsti, O.R. (1969). *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

61 According to Holsti, reliability is confirmed when the coefficient is equal to or greater than 0.85.

62 Azzi, A. (2012). *Methodology of Media Determinism Theory*, 1st ed. Tunis: Elddar El Mutawseteyya Lilnashr.

6. Criticism Formulated on VDT Epistemology and Assumptions

Opinions on VDT in the Arab world have seen a polarisation into two camps: the first one is constituted mainly by scholars and students who belong to the 'Proselytism Communication & Information' Department at the Al Amir Abdulkader University of Constantine. Later on, Algerian scholars from other universities and other scholars from the broader Arab and Islamic world joined them. This camp has welcomed the new theoretical framework; they consider it to be a much needed indigenous alternative to Western paradigms and theories in studying media phenomena. The supportive scholars have largely contributed to the popularisation of the VDT approach as well as to the explanation and application of its principles. The second camp is comprised of mass communication scholars who are more positivist in their approach and who formulate scepticism against and reservations about the theory.

The main criticism of VDT theory concerns its teleological nature as well as the absence of originality in the approach. Indeed, some critics have highlighted the fact that some mass communication researchers have seen VDT as a simple reincarnation of the Islamic Communication Perspective (ICP) elaborated by scholars since the 1970s (Badis 2014, 315)⁶³ Azzi, however, argues that VDT differs from the ICP in four aspects: first, VDT has proposed a positive methodological framework issued by the Western modern social and communicational theories, while ICP contributors stopped their efforts at narrating canonical texts. Azzi argues that they do not go beyond that narration in an effort to elaborate new concepts and theories based on an interaction with social and cultural realities. Second, unlike the ICP, VDT goes beyond 'diagnosing the problem' to an effective elaboration of a new conceptual framework and a new theorising effort from a cultural perspective. Third, unlike the ICP, value determinism theory in the media moves value from an 'advocacy/proselytising perspective' to a more 'rational and academic' perspective. Fourth, VDT does not position itself as a rupture with Western theories but as a complementary framework to them (Azzi, 12)⁶⁴

The second criticism of VDT regards its normative dimension and the absence of empirical foundations that might prove the veracity of its assumptions. Indeed, many VDT detractors have criticised Azzi's approach

63 Badis, L. (2014). Challenges that Face Value Determinism Theory in Media: A Critical and Comparative Study. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3: 312–349.

64 Azzi, A. (2008) Azzi's Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

arguing that the subject of science is phenomena in their existing reality and not in the state in which they should be. Azzi responds to this criticism by explaining that considering the subject of science to be only the tangible, without any consideration for morals and values, is a normative position in itself. He explains that the secularisation of the social sciences should not be the global rule, since it is specific to Western societies, due the antagonism between the Church and sciences.

He highlights that the secularisation of social sciences happened at a specific moment in Western world history, without happening in other religious contexts or in other cultural areas. Azzi deplors that this turn led to the rejection of all normative approaches because of the logical and circumstantial reasons specific to that period. Therefore, researchers in humanities and social sciences transformed human beings into mere instinctive psychological subjects (psychology), into mere social subjects (sociology), into mere political subjects (political science), into mere economic beings (economics), into a mere lingual subjects (linguistics), etc. (Azzi, 6-7)⁶⁵

The third criticism of VDT regards its determinist nature: many scholars have criticised the determinist approach adopted by Azzi and his disciples. Some of them argue that nowadays most sociologists see determinism as out of date and reality as too complicated to be explained by a single factor (Ben Salem 2014, 11)⁶⁶ Others argue that it is difficult to suppose a determinist relationship between variables at a macro level within the post-modern era, as determinism has become a relative value even in the field of pure sciences (Badis 2014, 317)⁶⁷ Azzi and Bouali reject this ‘reductionist view’ that considers determinism to be an inappropriate framework, arguing that determinism is still valid since nobody can question Einstein’s mathematical determinism, Newton’s physical determinism, or Freud’s psychological determinism, for example. All of these determinisms are built on only one factor such as gravity in newton’s Law of Gravity, relativity in Einstein’s theory of relativity, reason in Descartes’ thought and Freud’s theory of conscious and unconscious mind (Bouali 2018, 22-23)⁶⁸ Azzi and Bouali also affirm that value determinism is about the perception of a

65 Azzi, A. (2008) Azzi’s Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>. (accessed June, 2020).

66 Ben Salem, R. (2014). Has Media and Communication Sciences in the Arab Region Turned into an Arena for Quackery and Delirium? <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=408051>.

67 Badis, L. (2014). Challenges that Face Value Determinism Theory in Media: A Critical and Comparative Study. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3: 312–349.

68 Bouali, N. (2018). *Studies in the Theory of Value Determinism in the Media: Towards a Value/Civilizational Media Thought*, Muassasat Hussain Ras Al Jabal for Publication & Distribution ed.

value system as a general order that acts as a main engine that influences media phenomena in four components – sender, receiver, medium and message – with an evident effect on social and cultural structures within a specific cultural context (Azzi 2018, 7)⁶⁹ Azzi has affirmed also that he sees social subjects not as complicated phenomena but as elements of a complex structure, affirming that moral value is the supreme variable, the other variables are therefore only complementary, dependent, circumstantial and temporary (Azzi)⁷⁰

The fourth criticism levelled at VDT regards the ambiguous meaning of the term value itself and the difficulty of grasping its meaning in a scientific manner. Some scholars have criticised Azzi for considering value not as an object of research but as an ambiguous holistic concept used at the same time in the meaning of a dominant variable, a perspective, an approach and a vision. Furthermore, they highlight the difficulty of affirming that other factors such as social actions (or history or economy factors, for instance) are only dependent variables, without conducting serious longitudinal and empirical studies that take into account spatial and geographical discrepancies to prove that supposition (Badis 2014, 317)⁷¹ Azzi responds to this criticism with a normative argument, affirming that value is the supreme and unsurpassed determinant because in its essence value precedes reality (Azzi 2018, 7)⁷² Furthermore, Azzi affirms that value in media practices is a ‘science’ that requires the undergoing of further studies that take into account that value elements should not be approached through a partial view, but within a whole communicational, social and civilisational context (Azzi 2018, 14)⁷³

The fifth major criticism against VDT is the proximity noticed between its fundamental concepts and other concepts formulated by other sociologists, philosophers, or by other essentialist scholars in the communication field. Some critics have blamed Azzi’s theorising effort, claiming that it is more focused on essentialising terminology than on elaborating a new theory of communication (Ben Salem 2014, 6). Researchers have pointed out the fact that

69 Azzi, A. (2008) Azzi’s Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

70 Azzi, A. (2008). Azzi’s Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT. <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

71 Badis, L. (2014). Challenges that Face Value Determinism Theory in Media: A Critical and Comparative Study. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3: 312–349.

72 Azzi, A. (2008). Azzi’s Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT.” <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

73 zzi, A. (2008). Azzi’s Responses to THE Questions OF Al Aghouat University Students on VDT.” <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/questionsfromunivoflaghwat>.

Azzi did propose an essentialised conceptual framework to describe realities that had been already conceptualised by others. For instance, critics highlighted specifically the proximity between Azzi's 'tongue and media violence' concept with the 'symbolic violence' concept of Pierre Bourdieu, as well as his 'symbolic media capital' which can be correlated to Bourdieu's notion of 'social capital' (Badis 2014, 319)⁷⁴ The same can be said for other concepts related to concepts in Al Razi, Al Nawrasi, Bennabi or even Mowlana, with whom Azzi concurs by using the concept of 'altbligh' instead of communication and information. That being said, Azzi, originally a sociologist, has never concealed that Western sociologists or Western currents of thought, or other Arab and Muslim essentialists thinkers, have influenced him. In many of his works, he had clearly mentioned that he makes recourse to prior literature or methodological tools whenever necessary, regardless of whether or not these concepts reflect an essentialist perspective.

Despite its detractors, VDT has also received acceptance from some of the leading communication scholars and theorists in the West. For instance, Em Griffin welcomed Azzi's focus on values, describing this choice as 'commendable' and expressing his conviction that values and communication are intertwined. Furthermore, Griffin welcomed the VDT approach that considers religion as the fount of societal values highlighting that the connection between religions and media phenomena is absent in almost all Western theorising since religion is a 'black hole' in the majority of media and culture theories (Griffin, 2014)⁷⁵ For his part, Maxwell McCombs considers the VDT paradigm to be a thoughtful and productive framework that elicited thoughts about new aspects of agenda-settings to pursue (McCombs, 2014)⁷⁶ He suggested that the VDT approach could be applied to an agenda of values, not only in media messages (news and entertainment) but also in other bodies of communication (McCombs, 2014)⁷⁷ McCombs has underlined also that there is a need in media studies to go

74 Badis, L. (2014). "Challenges that Face Value Determinism Theory in Media: A Critical and Comparative Study. *Journal of Social Sciences* 3: 312–349.

75 Griffin, E. (2014). Personal Communication with Prof. Abderrahmane Azzi. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/em-griffin-and-vdt> (accessed June 2020).

76 McCombs, M. 2014. Personal communication with Prof. Abderrahmane Azzi. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/translation-by-dr-bouhmama-vdt> (accessed June, 2020).

77 Value Determinism Theory Website (2009). McCombs, Ma. (2014). Personal communication with Prof. Abderrahmane Azzi. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/translation-by-dr-bouhmama-vdt> (accessed June 2020).

beyond the reductive approach that consists of only describing and explaining how media affect people's views on public affairs (McCombs, 2014, personal communication)⁷⁸

Another major scholar whose work focuses more on the issues of ethics and values, namely Christians Clifford, considers VDT to be a chance to fill the gap caused by the positivist and the pragmatic orientations that dominate research in the social sciences. Clifford sees in VDT an opportunity to restore the importance of the concept of 'duty ethics' that has been ignored, neglected, and misused by scholars for a long time. For Clifford, the spiritual dimension is a complex issue for which VDT has given a wonderful remedy. Instead of separating moral philosophy as it used to be in the past by making faith and philosophy enemies, and thus drawing superficial conclusions from only one path, Azzi convincingly demonstrates how they intersect and depend on each other in order to analyse them appropriately. (Clifford, 2014)⁷⁹

Conclusion

VDT is a serious attempt by some Algerian scholars, led by Abderrahmane Azzi, to formulate an alternative approach to Western theoretical frameworks for dealing with media phenomena in less secularised societies; societies where the religious variable is still an important element in people's daily lives. Its conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework makes it able to claim the qualifier "theory", given that it is substantive in its foundations, systematic in its structure, holistic in its vision, proposes its own explanatory frame with predictive abilities, and has had its assumptions tested by many doctoral and undergraduate students using empirical tools. Some scholars even consider that VDT's framework goes beyond a theory and is, in fact, a paradigm, given that it has its own specific field of research, its own conceptual framework, its own methodology and its own community of practitioners (Badis 2014, 36-38)⁸⁰ However, the theory also has many challenges to overcome, as positivist scholars in social sciences as well as pure communication scholars may perceive VDT as

78 Value Determinism Theory Website (2009). McCombs, Ma. (2014). Personal communication with Prof. Abderrahmane Azzi.

Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/translation-by-dr-bouhmama-vdt> (accessed June, 2020).

79 Value Determinism Theory Website (2009) Clifford, C.G. (2014). Personal communication with Prof. Abderrahmane Azzi.

Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/clifford--azzi-and-duty-ethics> (accessed June, 2020).

80 Badis, L. 2014. Value Determinism Theory: Towards a Distinct Media Paradigm. *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (March): 17-44.

anachronistic in this era of post-modernity. The theory does indeed reactivate in a deterministic way, the religious factor so decried by the enlightenment philosophers and their heirs in the social sciences, who have vigorously rejected any interweaving of religion and scientific fact. Also, scholars criticise Azzi and his followers for straying from the tangible and the empirical scientific path by proposing a normative approach that takes as subject not the reality as it exists but as it should be.

VDT is neither the first to propose a normative approach, nor the first to use a systemic macroscopic view to analyse the effect of the media on societies. Moreover, this theory has its rightful place in social science paradigms, given that it proposes its own theoretical framework to understand the media's role on a macro level, both in terms of social and cultural changes inherent to values. This paradigm is specifically useful in the modern and post-modern eras, where the media endeavour to cut modern man off from his roots and his identity, plunging him into an identity crisis and a loss of references and values. Social sciences, for too long in the wake of secularisation, have neglected the religious factor, despite its implications for the lives of individuals in many secular and non-secular societies. Indeed, religion continues to act, at least symbolically, on both individuals and social systems (Schwartz 2014, 96-97)⁸¹, even though the majority of scholars pretend that this factor is non-existent, non-determinant or not an appropriate part of science. The strength of VDT lies in the fact that it provides a framework that explains how the media is a powerful instrument in the hands of modern and post-modern ideologies, and that it is a large contributor to the disenchantment of the world: a direct negative impact of modernity. Max Weber himself decried this disenchantment as he predicted that, under the pressure of the rationalisation imposed by the economy, it leads to a loss of meaning, to a decline in human values, and ultimately challenges human well-being (Weber 1978, 1116)⁸² Although dedicated to the study of media values in the Arab and Muslim worlds, VDT aspires to be a theory that goes beyond cultural and geographical divides. It proposes to rethink on a global scale the media's mission, placing their role far from the material and consumerist imperatives that have deflected the media from their potentially noble role, instead placing the ethical dimension – in its universal meaning – at the heart of the process of questioning the role of the media in elevating humans towards virtue.

81 Schwarz, F. (2014). *Le Sacré camouflé ou la crise du monde actuel*. Cabedita: Bière, Suisse.

82 Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Totwa, NJ: Bedminster Press.

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Abstract

Long time before Christians Clifford, Professor Azzi Abdulrahman has proposed a new ethical and normative paradigm with a structuralism orientation called “Value Determinism theory” (VDT) to study media effects. His ambition is to offer a new media study framework more suitable to understand media functioning and media impact in North Africa/Middle East region, where the religious factor remains a preponderant element in society or in other regions where the religion is still a central factor in society. Azzi’s approach proposes a new theoretical framework to deal with media effects that goes beyond the “so empirical”, “so materialist” and “so secular” frameworks in which Western media schools had locked the dominant media study approaches. The VDT proposes a controversial approach that takes its root in the religious factor, it suggests that media are value determined, knowing that the major source of values in Azzi’s conception is the religion. Hence, our study proposes to discuss the new VDT theory, as an emerging theoretical framework in the MENA

Region, intended to deal with media phenomenon from a new non-Western perspective. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, this study is aimed at discussing VDT³ assumptions and key concepts, as well as at assessing to which extent VDT theory is valid to address communication phenomena within a global context. The purpose of this study is to expose VDT's fundamentals and main concepts as well as to analyze its epistemological nature. The study concluded that despite the critics formulated against it by its detractors, the VDT has its rightful place in media studies paradigms, given that it proposes an original theoretical framework to understand the media's role, inherent to media impact both in terms of social and cultural changes on a macro level. However, VDT has to overcome major methodological obstacles to establish itself as a recognized Mass Communication theory.

Keywords

Media – Effects – Values –Determinism – Structuralism.

مستخلص

وقت طويل قبل اسهامات كرشين كليفوردا، اقترح الأستاذ عزي عبد الرحمن نموذجًا أخلاقيًا ومعياريًا جديدًا، ذات توجه بنيوي لدراسة تأثيرات وسائل الإعلام بمسمى «نظرية الحتمية القيمية». وكان مسعاه في ذلك هو تقديم إطار جديد لفهم أداء وسائل الإعلام وتأثيرها، يكون أكثر ملائمة لطبيعة منطقة شمال إفريقيا/الشرق الأوسط، أين يشكل البعد الديني عاملاً مهمًا في حياة المجتمعات أو في المجتمعات الأخرى التي ما يزال البعد الديني يشكل فيها بعداً مركزياً. وتقترح مقاربة عزي إطارًا نظريًا جديدًا للتعامل مع تأثيرات وسائل الإعلام، يتجاوز في طبيعته الأطر «التجريبية البحثية» والأطر «المادية البحثية» وكذا الأطر «العلمانية البحثية» التي أغلقت فيها مدارس الإعلام الغربية مختلف المقاربات المهيمنة في مجال الدراسات الإعلامية. وتقترح نظرية الحتمية القيمية مقاربة مثيرة للجدل بحكم أن منطلقها الأساسي هو العامل الديني. فهي ترى بأن وسائل الإعلام هي التي تحدد القيمة، مع العلم بأن المصدر الرئيسي للقيم في مفهوم عزي هو الدين. ومن ثم، تقوم في دراستنا هذه بمناقشة نظرية الحتمية القيمية الجديدة، باعتبارها إطارًا نظريًا ناشئًا في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا، يقترح التعامل مع ظاهرة الإعلام من منظور «تأصيلي» جديد غير غربي. وابتاع منهج وصفي وتحليلي، قام الباحث في هذه الدراسة باستعراض ومناقشة افتراضات نظرية الحتمية القيمية ومختلف المفاهيم الأساسية التي قامت عليها، بالإضافة إلى تقييم مدى صلاحية نظرية الحتمية القيمة لمعالجة الظواهر الإعلامية في سياق عالمي. وهدفت الدراسة من خلال ذلك الكشف عن أساسيات ومفاهيم نظرية الحتمية القيمية، وتحليل طبيعتها الاستيمولوجية. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنه وعلى الرغم من الانتقادات التي وجهت لها من قبل منتقديها، إلا أن نظرية الحتمية القيمية لها مكانتها في نماذج الدراسات الإعلامية، بالنظر إلى أنها تقترح إطارًا نظريًا أصيلاً لفهم دور وسائل الإعلام في تأثير وسائل الإعلام المرتبط بالتغيرات الثقافية والتغيرات الاجتماعية على مستوى كلي. غير أن الدراسة تخلص في

ذات الوقت إلى أن هناك تحديات منهجية كبرى ما تزال تواجه النظرية، على حاملها تجاوزها لكي تنجح في فرض نفسها كنظرية إعلام معترف بها.

كلمات مفتاحية

الإعلام - التأثيرات - القيم - الحتمية - البنائية.

Résumé

Bien avant Christians Clifford, le professeur Azzi Abdulrahman avait proposé un nouveau paradigme éthique/normatif à orientation structuraliste pour étudier les effets des médias, appelé « Théorie du Déterminisme Par Les Valeurs » plus connu par son acronyme anglais (VDT) pour « Value Determinism Theory ». Son ambition était d'offrir un nouveau cadre d'étude des médias à même d'expliquer le fonctionnement et l'impact de ces derniers dans la région d'Afrique du Nord/Moyen-Orient, où dans les régions dans lesquelles le facteur religieux demeure un élément central dans la vie des sociétés. L'approche d'Azzi propose un nouveau cadre théorique digne d'intérêt pour traiter des effets des médias qui va au-delà des cadres si « empiriques », si « matérialistes » et si « séculier » dans lesquels les écoles occidentales avaient enfermé les approches qui ont dominé l'étude des médias. La VDT se risque de proposer une approche controversée en prenant racine dans le facteur religieux. Elle suggère en effet que les médias sont déterminés par la valeur, sachant que la principale source de celle-ci - dans la conception d'Azzi - est la religion. La présente étude se propose de discuter la VDT en tant que cadre théorique émergent dans la région MENA, destiné à traiter du phénomène médiatique dans une nouvelle perspective non-occidentale. En utilisant une approche descriptive et analytique, notre étude vise à faire ressortir et discuter les hypothèses et les concepts clés de la VDT, ainsi qu'à évaluer dans quelle mesure cette théorie est valide pour aborder les phénomènes de communication de masse dans un contexte global. Le but de cette étude est d'exposer les fondements et les principaux concepts de la VDT ainsi que d'analyser sa nature épistémologique. L'étude conclut qu'en dépit des critiques formulées à son encontre par ses détracteurs, la VDT demeure une approche qui a toute sa place dans les paradigmes des études des médias et de la communication de masse, étant donné qu'elle propose un cadre théorique original pour comprendre l'effet des médias, tant en termes sociologiques que culturels et a un niveau macrosociologique. Cependant, la VDT qui est encore en devenir, se doit surmonter certains obstacles méthodologiques majeurs afin s'imposer comme une théorie entièrement reconnue dans le domaine de l'étude des communications de masse.

Mots-clés

Médias – Effets – Valeurs – Déterminisme – Structuralisme.
