

Intercultural Communication Choices in the Muhammad Caricature Debacle

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Abstract

Intercultural communication is often difficult as has been shown with the Muhammad caricature debacle. Using an intercultural communication model, the caricature debacle is reviewed as to what happened and why. The classic differences in protocol characteristics, religion, and humor between the Western views and the Islamic views are discussed. A summary, conclusions, and recommendations for other similar intercultural communication will be offered.

Introduction

Knowing the culture you are talking about can be an essential element of not offending another person or group of people. It is important to recognize topics that are taboo in conversation and in writing. When someone is rude or insensitive humorously to another culture, situations such as the riots caused by the Muhammad caricature happen (Martin & Chaney, 2006). However, it is the premise of this paper that there is insensitivity on both sides of this particular issue because there is a gap on both sides of understanding each other's culture.

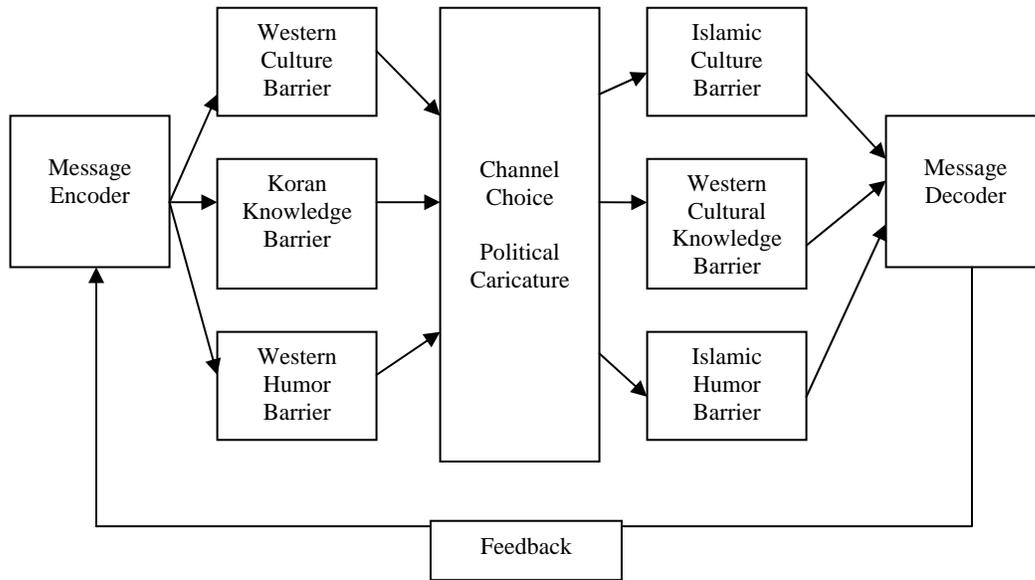
Exchanges of information and thoughts between cultures can be substantive such as the discussion of prices or nonsubstantive such as social conversations (Martin & Chaney, 2006). The Muhammad caricature was meant to be humorous by the Danish artist and newspaper and nonsubstantive; however, the Muslims viewed the caricature as very substantive. Because the cultures' protocols are very different, the Muslims took the caricature as a major affront to their religion. The caricature has caused a breach of etiquette between the West and the Muslim worlds.

The fact that very few Western people have ever read any of the Koran, they have a cultural blank on what is in the Koran; and therefore, what may be offense to someone of the Islamic religion.

Intercultural Communication Model

Figure 1, Intercultural Communication Model in Conflict, describes what happened in the caricature incident.

Figure 1. Intercultural Communication Model in Conflict



The Danish artist and newspaper as the message encoder, and from a very ethnocentric Western cultural and humor perspective, and no Koran knowledge chose as their channel of communication to draw and publish the offensive Muhammad caricature. The Muslims as the decoders of the caricature chose to decode it from their ethnocentric Islamic perspective with no consideration of the West's lack of knowledge of the Koran or knowledge of what the West feels is humorous. However, there was a time warp of five months before the Muslims provided much feedback on the caricature to the Danish.

Cultural Effects on the Intercultural Communication Model

When you look at the incident through the model, you are going through the logical steps in the intercultural communication exchange. It is easier to understand why the Muslims were so incensed and why the West could not understand their concern. They have no common base from which to communicate to each other; they were both operating from an ethnocentric perspective.

Different Protocols

Leaptrot (1996) describes the three fundamental classifications of protocol which are tribal, collective, and pluralist. We will discuss the pluralist and the tribal because these are the two basic protocols that are involved in this caricature situation. The Islamic religion is a form of tribal protocol. Tribal involves close family units, close relationship with friends and business partners, and a strong connection to the past. In the tribal protocol a person's word is the most important part of building a relationship. The Danish (and much of the West) are pluralist societies. People in a pluralist society belong to many groups and are not as concerned about the past as tribal people are. According to Ping (1998) when two cultures do not share the same reality, they do not share the same needs. When expectations are

different and not meet, disastrous consequences happen such as blasphemous caricatures being published and the riots over the caricatures.

When different mindsets exist there is a lack of stability and compatibility between the two cultures. With this cognitive dissonance, it is difficult for either culture to understand the other. It is necessary that each culture acknowledges that the other culture is having problems understanding a different culture and religion in this case. In addition, the more abstract the subject the more difficult it is to view it from the other culture's mindset (Fisher, 1997). On both sides tolerance, discussion, and education was what was needed in the caricature situation. The feedback loop needed to be used until all sides understood and could empathize with the other side.

Understanding of Religion

Religion impacts how people communicate. In many parts of the world, including the Middle East, religion is a way of life. In countries where there is separation of church and state, such as the United States, all religions are treated equally. Which means religion is a humor subject at the expense of whatever religion is being caricatured. In countries where there is separation of church and state everyone knows that they are expected to follow the law of the land first and their religious laws second. Whereas in a religiously dominated country the religious and secular laws lines of demarcation are blurred. This is the reason the Danish had no problem with running a caricature of Muhammad, they were free to say whatever they felt. Unlike in the Islamic countries where the government controls what people are allowed to say. Also most Christian countries do not read the Koran and do not know that it is forbidden that there be any kind of drawing, painting, or depiction of the Muhammad.

Religion answers questions concerning what is life and death, the creation of the universe, society's origin, relationships between people within the society, and our relationship to nature. Individuals can use religion as psychological welfare to understand what is not easily explained. Religion is one of the main contrasting cultural values people have (Samovar & Porter, 2004).

What is surprising is the length of time between when the caricature was first printed, September, 2005, in Denmark with very little protest by Danish Muslims. At the same time, Egypt reprinted the cartoon without any noticeable wrath from Muslim clerics. It was only after a December meeting of the Organization of Islamic Conferences that the cartoons were used to show devote Muslims that the freedom and democracy of the West denigrates Islam. Religion has been used to orchestrate political unrest. Iran does not want Denmark to assume the presidency of the U.N. Security Council, and other countries need something other than their government for the people to respond. There is a conflict of culture; there is also a conflict within many of the Islamic nations (Clash, 2006).

Understanding of Humor

Humor is often used to establish a relaxed atmosphere. Humor can be categorized as absurdity, exaggeration, human situations, playful ridicule, and surprise. Humor often does not transcend the culture for which it was designed. Humor is generally viewed as a way to diffuse tension and to convey a message indirectly. In the West we laugh at other people, not as ridicule, but as a way to say we can appreciate the humor in the situation. The West sees Iran having nuclear weapons as a negative. It

would be natural as a way to see the humorous side of a possibly traumatic situation and to help people gain a perspective of the situation to draw cartoons of the situation. Part of the purpose of friendly cartoons in cultures, where it is acceptable, is to learn to deal with friendly insults in a positive way (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Paulson (1989) said “Humor is an ability to stand outside of life’s flow and view the whole scene—the incongruities, the tragedies outside our control, and the unexpected” (p.6). A true sense of humor includes a sense of irony; it involves the wisdom to recognize the irrational in the presence of apparent reason. As Ober (1998) says humor is meant to augment, not detract, from the conveyed message.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Many layers exist in the Muhammad caricature situation—hate crime, political cartoon, lack of education, political unrest, and political abuse of a situation.

Hate crimes can result from the fear differences can cause and result in hostility towards the group perceived as different. While the Danish did not mean for their caricature to be seen as hostile, they were showing their fear of Iran becoming a nuclear power. Since Arabic is not a language of Denmark, nor is the Islamic religion a major religion, the cartoonist, it is safe to assume, did not know that it was blasphemous to depict Muhammad in any form. Of course depicting Muhammad humorously did not help the situation. Given that very few people in Denmark said anything and that it took five months for other countries in the Middle East to respond, it is not surprising that the West is asking what is the problem and having trouble understanding the rioting that is happening.

Once you have been told that the Koran says it is blasphemous to depict Muhammad, it is understandable to see that Denmark stepped on something that is considered very holy to Muslims. However, is it too much to ask Muslims to educate the West rather than riot. As one of my students said in a discussion of this situation, “Don’t they know that they look ignorant to us rioting about something that was not intended to be interpreted, as they are interpreting it, five months after the event.” If you look at Figure 1, it is obvious that direct feedback in the form of education was never part of the communication process. There is also the problem that the humor was not meant for the people in the Middle East but for the Danish readers of the journal in which it was first published.

Now that it is known that Muhammad is not to be depicted, people have been educated, and to want to irritate Muslims by reprinting the offending cartoons does not make sense. Some things we do not have to see to know that they are improper, depicting the cartoons in words is quite sufficient at this point in time.

However, the Middle Eastern governments that are crying foul and saying the West is defaming them have to look at what they are doing to the West also. An understanding is necessary that all countries will choose different types of governments under which to live and that other countries must respect those differences and not impose their own beliefs on other governments. After all, once the caricature was printed, the only thing that could be done was for the Middle East to educate, and the Danish

cartoonist to apologize for ignorance. It was necessary for the cartoonist to apologize because humor should not be intended to be blasphemous, in any culture.

The conclusion is that people should do a little research before they write about, depict, or in anyway do something that could be misinterpreted; however, it is also safe to say that in this large world of ours that you cannot know everything and that education should be the first line of defensive rather than riots when mistakes are made. It is also easy to see that this was not immediately a crisis and only became one when it was politically convenient.

It is our recommendation that in this very unstable time in the Middle East that Western newspaper people and journalist in general be very careful about due diligence to the research part of their reporting.

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