

REDEFINING TAARAB IN RELATION TO LOCAL AND GLOBAL INFLUENCES*

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To refer to the origin of taarab as a direct importation of Egyptian music by the Arab upper class (Topp 1994:153) is a plausibility without solid evidence. To define it as a style of music played for entertainment at weddings and other festive occasions all along the Swahili Coast (153) is to exclude other styles of music, indeed played for entertainment at weddings and other festive occasions all along the Swahili Coast. To say that taarab contains all the features of a typical 'Indian Ocean music', combining influences from Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, India and the West with local musical practices (153) is apparently true but does not adequately capture the ambiguities and complexities of its protean nature. Referring to taarab as the Swahili popular 'salon' music whose song may be recorded or, as often is the case, orally transmitted (King'ei 1992:29) is misleading, for taarab is not always 'salon' music and the method and process of creating and transmitting a song in taarab is not the same as that of other forms of African music. To state that taarab has transcended its local Swahili boundaries to be consumed in other communities including other cities in East and central Africa (Ntarangwi 1998:150) is a valid statement from a point of view of media, change and spread, but still leaves out a lot to be said.¹

Taarab, like so many complex living things, refuses to be thrust into neat bags or squeezed into terse all-embracing definitions. It is an ongoing process whose form(s) are amorphous, assuming different structures, roles, functions and epithets triggered by a number of factors. For example, taarab can be categorized according to number and types of instruments used in its performance, the manner and style in which the instruments are played, how its lyrics are composed, put into music and sung, the degree of memorization and improvisation of the songs during performances, the sizes of groups of its artists, tunes and musical lines adopted, lyrical forms and their thematic preferences, gender and sexuality issues involved. To this list we should also add on the one hand, its sustained interconnectedness with the development of the media enhancing its growth and cross-fertilization and on the other, the socio-cultural and politico-economic factors that have time and again impinged on its change and variability.

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¹ For a general overview of the taarab genre cf. Anthony (1983), Askew (1997), Campbell (1983), Graebner (1991), Khatib (1992), Knappert (1977), Mgana 1991.

That notwithstanding – whatever forms, role and function taarab exhibits at different stages, its making consists of *five* major components or processes: the composition of the lyric, the composition of musical patterns, the extemporized performance of its song, instrumentation and audience.

The composition of the taarab lyric is distinguished from the composition of lyrics of other types of music in East Africa for its *preparedness* and *detachment*.² Whereas lyrics of other types of music are created impromptu as performance proceeds, the taarab lyric is written before it is put into music,³ relying (especially in the traditional sense of taarab) on strict and rigid rules of prosody, its *shape*⁴ resembling that of Arabic poetry often claimed to be its precursor. Here is a typical *shape*⁵ of a traditional taarab lyric:

8 syllabic metre stanza

----8----c ----8----d
 ----8----c ----8----d
 ----8----c ----8----d
 ----8----e ----8----f

(a refrain / sung chorus)

Mwezi

Unapochomo <u>za</u>	na uzuri wa <u>ko</u>	(soloist)
Unanipumb <u>aza</u>	kwa kicheko cha <u>ko</u>	
Kuwa n'nawe <u>za</u>	ningekuja kwa <u>ko</u>	

Ewe mwezi ewe a <u>zi</u>	nipe ngazi nipa <u>ndie</u>	(refrain sung by the chorus)
Ewe mwezi ewe mpen <u>zi</u>	nipe mbawa nira <u>kie</u>	

(The) Moon

When you appear	with your grandeur.
You bemuse me	with your laughter.
Were it possible	I would have come to you.

Oh the moon oh the precious one,	give me a ladder to climb with.
Oh the moon oh my love,	give me wings to fly with.

² This is due to the fact that the lyric has to be composed separately and independently from the music which is not the practice in African orature

³ The lyric of *muziki wa dansi* ('dance music') is also written before it is put into music, but usually in less prosodic tendencies.

⁴ I use the word 'shape' here to counter the longstanding claim that Swahili traditional poetry is an outright imitation of Arabic poetry. The word *shape* refers to the *externality* of a poem – that is a way a poem is perceived on the surface rather than how it is composed internally. I reserve the words *form* and *structure* for a reference to its inner mechanism, the linguistically intrinsic features and their cultural endowment that give uniqueness to the poetry of a certain language and culture and distinguish it from poetry of other languages and cultures. We maintain that it is from these intra-structural criteria and their cultural concomitants that we can distinguish a given poetry from poetry of other languages and cultures

⁵ This is one of the many shapes and forms of the taarab lyric traditionally written in a prosodic style. These rigid shape and form have changed tremendously in modern taarab as it will be shown in the following pages.

The Swahili verse in this traditional form had already rooted itself firmly in the Swahili culture by the 17th century, long before taarab music made any significant mark here. Actually taarab flourished very well from the *providence* of this poetic tradition which was then at its peak. On the other hand, Swahili poetry has also profoundly and variedly enriched itself from taarab music by responding to musical patterns, ideas, themes, motifs and imagery that have ever since been forthcoming locally and from Asian, European and Latin American origins through mass media.

The composition of taarab music derives inspiration from a vast repertoire with a wide range of structures from both local and global tunes. Depending on what is composed first and what follows next, taarab lyrics are composed following or completely independent from given musical tunes. Vice versa, certain musical patterns may arise out of certain poetic forms. Thus, the taarab lyric and music co-exist mutually, influencing each other. Here is an example of a poem which must have been composed to fit a given tune. In other words, the tune was composed first and then the composition of the lyric followed.

---9---f	-3--g	---6---h	(soloist)
---6---f	-3--g	---6---h	
---7---f	-3--g	---6---h	

-3--m	---7---j	(chorus)
-3--m	---9---k	
-3--m	---8---k	
-3--m	--10---k	

Ya Qamary⁶

Hakika kionana na <u>'we</u>	azizy	yanayotoke <u>za</u>	(soloist)
Huwa na kiwew <u>e</u>	habibty	bali hujikaz <u>a</u>	
Ungejua mwenyew <u>e</u>	hayaty	vipi wanitanz <u>a</u>	

Aaa	ya huby	mpenzi	(chorus)
Aaa	ya alby	wangu moyoni	
Aaa	ya umry	duniani	
Aaa	hayaty	mpaka peponi	

(The) Moon

Truly when I see you	the rarity	strange things happen
I become nervous	my love	but pretend nothing happens
I wish you knew	my existence	how you puzzle me

⁶ Notice a tacit violation of 'strict' prosody, i.e. an irregular number of syllables in the *vipande*.

Oh, you my love the one I adore
 Oh, you my heart you who are in it
 Oh, you the reason for me to be in this world
 Oh, you my life even in paradise

A much more deviant form, from a point of view of a neat prosody is the following lyric typical of the modern taarab of *mipasho* type with its subverting tendencies. This kind of lyric with a relatively free style, renders less rigidity due to the fact that it relies heavily on local percussive musical structures for vigorous and quicker danceable tempos. These musical structures are not amenable to the strict rules of the prosody. Here is a piece showing no linear division and meter and less symmetry in its rhyming.

Mwongo Aso Haya⁷

Mwongo aso haya usimwachie
 Kwa kumkomesha kiroho mbaya asirudie
 Mwongo aso haya jamani mzomeeni
 Mtimueni huyo

The shameless liar, never leave her alone
 Her treacherous ways should be stopped not to recur
 The shameless liar should be censured
 Make her disappear

The extemporized performance of the taarab song is a process that begins when the music start to be composed to when it is actualized in a public performance. Taarab music is never written. It is played by the ear through several sessions of practice and rehearsal and thrown together with the lyric to something relatively fixed as a song. Occasionally however, some taarab groups compose '*bashraf(s)*' – which are pieces of instrumental music devoid of lyrics, played before the actual performance or between breaks during concerts or shows.

Other performative aspects exhibited by a soloist, chorus and musicians are also important in distinguishing taarab from other types of music. The style of vocalization in the singing, especially in traditional taarab, incorporates unique soloist and chorus vocal manipulation, gesticulation, mimicry, dance, body language and movements unique to taarab⁸ – slow movements for tacit nuances, vigorous ones for explicit sexual references. New ways of composing taarab lyrics in a free style in *mipasho* type with a tendency for explicitness, sexism and cynicism, therefore accords very well with the vigorous tempo of the music and erotic body movements.

⁷ This is just a short part of the song lyric.

⁸ The traditional elitist taarab is completely free of the vigorous movements of the body and has a clear-cut divide between performers and audience. The dance mode, the active participation of the audience and vigorous erotic movements of women's bellies and behinds are some of the distinguishing criteria setting apart traditional taarab from modern one, especially *mipasho*.

Instrumentation is another component that helps to sub-categorize taarab. Styles and forms of taarab hinted at above are distinguished by types of musical instruments and how they are used. For example, whereas *kidumbaki* consists of a ad hoc or semi-permanent group of three or four artistes playing music and singing for specific functions and at different situations and contexts⁹ accompanied by only a violin, *dumbak* and locally made *sanduku* (tea-chest-bass), traditional elitist taarab of the like of *Ikhwan Safaa* and *Culture Musical Club* (in Zanzibar), *Egyptian Musical Club* and *Al-Watan Musical Club* (in Dar-es-Salaam), is always made up of large groups using different oriental and western instruments to produce heavy and slow ringing music for listening purposes. The musical lines created by these groups are normally of Arabian, Indian, Western and Latin American influences and rarely from the local origins. However, *Kidumbaki* tends to exploit more the local repertoire for its poetical lines and musical tunes – always played in quicker tempos with bare simplicity.

The number of soloists singing together or separately, one at a time, one stanza of the lyrics or several, do also give an inkling of the type of taarab involved. In the remote past, there were a number of ad hoc taarab(s) in which music was played and stanzas were sung in turns among say 10 to 20 participants sitting and swinging on chairs or moving around in the manner of *Kidumbaki* taarab to-day.¹⁰

In the later half of the 1980s taarab underwent a dramatic change from traditional elitist style (*taarab asilia*) that is slow, tender, romantic and less inclined to commercialization, to a style that is vigorous and sensational, played mainly for commercial purposes – a style called *mipasho* meaning telling things openly and point-blankly.

Mipasho decries a number of prerequisites inherent in *taarab asili*. For example, whereas *taarab asili* still uses instruments such as *udi* (Arabian lute), *ganuni* (Arabian zither with 78 strings), violins, a cello or several, accordion, electric guitar and a double bass, *mipasho* uses an electric guitar and key-board for melodic counterpoints, electric bass for harmonic references and recently western drum-kits for rhythm and various additional percussion instruments like the tambourine, rattles and timing stick. The thinning of the number and type of instruments is intended to approximate as much as possible the danceable mode of what is called here *muziki wa dansi*, whose popularity is gradually side-lined in the market by *mipasho*. The reduction of musical instruments and number of musicians, allows this particular type of *taarab* to travel lightly and economically from place to place maximizing profit.

Mipasho is also marked by a change in the style of vocalization of the singer and chorus. Though the singer still maintains a residue of the voice quality in the singing style that utilizes 30 *njia(s)* (musical lines) based on ways of reciting Qur'an, the effect is hardly perceptible

⁹ *Kidumbaki* type of taarab for example, is a transient type of taarab serving for entertainment at weddings of lower class families who can not afford to pay for the elitist taarab which after all, lacks the sensational aspects required for this purpose

¹⁰ This is attested to by a collection of short or one stanza lyrics during my research in Lamu in February 2001. Such lyrics are perhaps still orally circulated in Mombasa, Pemba, and Unguja (Zanzibar).

compared with the singing style in *taarab asili* in which even musical instruments are tuned to the 30 *njia(s)* and singers follow suit in harmony.

Rusha-roho is a later development equally targeted for dance purposes. It is a sub-category which totally ties up with media technology. In *rusha-roho* there is no live performance, but one in which cassette-recorded *mipasho* songs are played and audience (composed completely of women) dance to the tune.

Taa-rap, being experimental in the fusion of *taarab* and rap styles, is also marked by sharp contrasts to all other types in the use of instruments, musical beats, tempo, vocalization and its closeness to the rap style. *Taa-rap*, however retains a substantial ring, lyric conventions and style of vocalization that is typically *taarab*'s.

The audience is also an integral part of *taarab*, playing either less active role of watching and listening or engaged in it actively. *Taarab* in its elitist sense – at least in Zanzibar – started as listening music, hence a clear performer/audience divide. However, the gap has been gradually narrowed in the course of time, with increasing participation of the audience to an extent that few people sit on chairs (if any) when *taarab* is performed these days, since modern *taarab* is deliberately geared at creating a 'dance' situation.

Taarab can also be stylistically categorized according to countries and regions in which local colors give distinctive characteristics. We can therefore talk of Zanzibar *taarab*, Dar-es-Salaam *taarab*, Tanga *taarab*, Mombasa *taarab*, Lamu *taarab*, Oman *taarab*, Dubai *taarab*, Rwanda *taarab*, Burundi *taarab*, Comoro *taarab* – each having its own flavor and taste distinguishing it from others.

The question of the origin of *taarab* is not totally irrelevant here, since we cannot discuss the globalization of *taarab* without tracing *taarab*'s origin. However, the origin of *taarab* in East Africa is nebulous and obscured and clouded with scepticism. In some circles in Lamu and Mombasa, it is maintained that it evolved locally, only later to assume coloration from the popular tunes from Indian film industry. In Zanzibar and Dar-es-salaam where practitioners mostly use sources of Arabian and Western music, *taarab*, especially in its sophisticated and highly developed stage, is claimed to have been imported from Egypt for the enlargement of royal ensembles in Zanzibar where perhaps first songs were sung in Arabic. Whatever the case, *taarab* was later popularized and let loose to spill out of the royal palace to the whole of Zanzibar Islands and other coastal areas.

At different periods of its existence in Zanzibar and the rest of the East African coast, *taarab* has been marked by both male and female involvement in it. At the early stages of its development in the past however, women were not allowed to take part against the background of Islamic orthodoxy. It was the courage of Siti bint Saad that made it possible to pave the way for more and more women to take part in it – first in separate groups and later in mixed ones.

We can now sum up the salient features of *taarab* in East Africa:

First, its flexibility, openness, versatility, scope and adaptive nature that allows it to incorporate into its own body various poetic and musical structures, a feature that distinguishes taarab from any other music types in East Africa. Whereas for example, typical up-country music or any other local music in this region has a few short, repetitive local musical sources for its creation, taarab has a wider and more open range of 'music types' of relatively more complex structures from both local and trans-cultural sources. Taarab – an extremely lively art that sprung from an urban classical culture and still popular, draws all the time from the old and new and from the local and global – a major part of the social life of the Swahili people and now East African people in general.

Second, the unique style of vocalization having a pseudo-Arabian and Indian ring, a ring that is never the same as Arabian and Indian music – the style of vocalization based on *njia(s)*, consisting of 30 methods of reciting Qur'an to which the taarab singer must adopt to at least to a minimal degree.

Third, its link with Swahili prosodic poetry, a feature that is unique to taarab in relation to any other contemporary popular music in East Africa. In spite of the fact that in modern taarab there is laxity to the rigid rules of prosody in its lyrics these days, the prosody is not completely relegated to free verse style even in *mipasho* and *taa-rap*.

Fourth, the extra-linguistic features the soloist and the chorus use – the configuration of gestures, facial expression, and body language and movement is a feature that is maintained in all forms of taarab.

Fifth, the whole process of the making of taarab from its composition to its actualization with the art of presentation for the stage show, involving the announcer with his/her elaborate comic introductions to the lyric and music composer, soloists, chorus, musicians, distinguishes taarab from other music types here.

The above attempt to re-define taarab from a structural point of view, does ontologically reveal an extent to which taarab is connected to global influences from its inception. But there is more to the relationship of taarab to globalization than its mere interconnectedness with the development of mass media in the first decades of the last century. Our probe into taarab offers an opportunity to revisit the term globalization with an emphasis on how global cultural flows disseminated through media channels have influenced changes in taarab resulting in *syncretic phenomena* and how much this phenomenon shows resistance with inclination to 'own cultural identity'. This is therefore a probe that also sees history, dynamism of culture, economic constraints, societal and political changes as playing a crucial role in the development of any art.

Our investigation of taarab reveals that the term globalization as normally claimed, has not just suddenly cropped up to describe the rapid expansion of global exchange of commodities and cultural flows, but rather is a 'process' that had started prior to the advent of Western

colonization of Africa and developed gradually to new heights¹¹ with the development of new media technologies and the emergence of a new post cold-war world order. Taarab is said to have originated from and has hence been associated with *secondary centers* such as the Gulf States, Egypt and India rather than with *primary Western* ones. Further spread of it at different historical conjunctures from places like Lamu, Mombasa and Zanzibar to the Comoros, up-country Tanzania and Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi has added new dimensions and fostered unique dispersal patterns. In recent times, the Swahili language taarab has been seen to take root in the Sultanate of Oman and other Gulf countries. This spread undermines the tenet that globalization is wholly synonymous with Westernization or Americanization.

Due to its flexibility and versatility, taarab has always shown readiness to experiment and innovate its musical, poetic and performative structures using both local and global inputs. The following three paradigms seem to explain change(s), innovation(s) and the shaping of international culture through taarab vis-a-vis the mass media.

First, a paradigm that sees change in art through the existence of powerful processes of exchange and competition or through influences motivated by merits, curiosity and long-term perspectives. "Here [...] culture is seen as what connects us and contrasts us from our immediate communities. Its paradoxes drive us to communicate, clarify and wonder about others whose raw material we use to interact with our own and other communities (Gurnah 1997:116-117). This paradigm applies when an art exists and functions, from a point of view of its existence, for pure entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. It is hence detached from ambitious drives towards commercialization and economic gains. It also applies when sentiments of *cultural identity* have not yet surfaced in a society. In taarab this paradigm was at work from its inception in the 20s to the 1970s when it more openly assumed a commercialized role.

Second, a paradigm that shows the observance of transient and experimental modes geared at affecting conscious change that fit the increasing role of commercialization, utilizing available resources. From the 1970s onwards, the available technical resources were congenial to the creation of a new form of modern taarab which utilizes keyboard, electric solo guitar and bass guitar to create taarab for dance purposes, the type of taarab whose songs must ideally appeal to certain segments of coastal communities as well as those on the mainland Tanzania and Kenya – especially when the preference is to percussive styles from local *ngoma* like *msondo*, *chakacha*, *kumbwaya*, *vugo*, *bomu*, *lelemama*, *beni* (*mbwa kachoka*) etc. The ideal elitist taarab with its typically sentimental themes of love is now challenged by a new style with lyrics having down-to-earth themes depicting sometimes 'naked reality' of everyday life written in a more or less free verse form.

¹¹ Ikhwan Safaa Musical Club is said to have been founded in 1905, but surely this does not mark the inception of taarab which is definitely before that.

Third, a paradigm that might take global influences on taarab in a 'hypothetical ideal' of 'homogeneity and oneness' stressing a sense of flow of culture from dominant societies to less dominant ones to even the remotest areas of the globe. This may be true when we consider globalization is from a point of view of technological and scientific exchanges and not cultural exchanges. In the process of cultural flows from dominant societies to less dominant ones, there must be junctures at which local cultural values compete or even clash with the global ones. Hence the limit of globalization and its 'cultural assaults'. In this case, the interface between local and global cultures must be seen as being at the same time harmonious and contradictory if not of competitive rivalry.

The shift towards an 'indigenization' of taarab, especially the taarab of Tanga and later of Dar-es-Salaam was envisaged to somehow resist such cultural assaults and hence expand its sphere of influence and popularity to areas where, as a coastal music, it was not accepted for its 'foreign' ring and taste. This is by implication, resisting global influences. But a shift towards indigenization of taarab was also envisaged to expand the market, heretofore basically confined to weddings and sales of audio-cassettes. The shift coincided with the liberalization of economy and politics in Tanzania in which 'nominal freedom' in many sectors of the society was now granted. Taarab artists seized this freedom for their advantage. They now composed both music and poetry to submerge the political inhibitions as well as ethical and religious morality which were in the past considered as snags towards artistic freedom of expression. Hence from 1980s onwards, taarab entered a new phase – a phase of full-fledged commercialization in which taarab underwent a radical change creating styles that fed on sensationalism, cynicism, sexism, exchange of abuses and insults and drive towards money-making.

Our attempt at understanding this internal situation affecting changes and innovations in taarab, finds 'plausibility' from three parameters. First, a society that suddenly finds itself with a nominal freedom and openness may find itself plunging into hazardous experiments in almost everything. Second, the situation worsens when such freedom and openness goes hand in hand with abject poverty making the cherished cultural values created over time hang somewhere precariously before crumbling down. Third, the situation is even more aggravated when a society has not developed a critical forum to curb the influences of what may appear to be decadent culture. In this we see the role of media whose influence is described by Heidt (1987:3) as follows:

[...] a factor in socialisation, as mediators of knowledge and world views, as agents of and catalysts for change, as cultural mechanism of maintaining social order. Media are no longer dealt with only or mainly as different technologies for information, but contribute to the shaping of a social identity, mainly by means of their explicit content.

It is no wonder that there have been official and unofficial debates in Tanzania on the social and cultural influences of a taarab type called '*mipasho*' which means telling things openly and point blankly – a non-euphemistic way of telling things.¹²

Mipasho to large extent taps from local musical repertoire that offers sensational rhythms for erotic movements of the body (especially women's bellies and behinds). The rhythms and erotic body movements accord very well with the new lyrical shape and structure that approximate the free verse form. In fact the amalgamation bespeaks of absolute freedom or freedom in totality. The expansion of poetic diction with frequency and recurrence of the use of tropes and imagery based on items like 'pajero', 'US dollar', 'mobile telephone' (kisimu cha mkono), gold, accessories, expensive dresses and shoes, the depiction of women as being ever-ready to be seduced by 'TXs' (i.e. foreign male experts as source of monetary gains) or by *buzi(s)*, (i.e. local rich people who are quick at extravagance and womanizing), the tendency for the lyrics to use code-switching and code-mixing have indeed boosted and expanded the market in terms of live performances, sales of CDs, audio and video cassettes.

Since we cannot provide here the rhythm suffices it to show the typical lyric of *mipasho* type of taarab. Here is the song, '*C*' *Licence* depicting love-making in the guise of driving theatrics.

'C' Licence

Dereva shika sukani	unionyeshe ujuzi
Conductor kasema	tungo hizo haziwezi
Nakujua mitaani	kama wewe hatokezi
Kubwa yako leseni	Umeipata kwa kazi
Hakika huna utani	wala <i>pozi</i> huongozi
Dereva wewe wa shani	mikono <i>hautembezi</i>
Gusa yako 'mebaini	wengineo hawawezi
Hutetereshi sukani	gari lenda kwa ujuzi
Kwangu wewe namba wani	kisifu sikutukuzi
Ufikapo mlimani	mwendo wako hupunguzi
Passenger 'meduwaa	metumia ipi kozi?
Gia za ndani kwa ndani	wabadilisha kwa <i>pozi</i>
Husahau ya <i>konani</i>	vituo hupitilizi
Nakungoja sitieshini	nafasi siipotezi

¹² In fact some people reject the idea that these are forms of taarab.

Nilipe ujira gani	ewe wangu mpumbazi
Raha hii kwangu ngeni	naumia sijiwezi
Imezidi yako fano	yako moja huongezi
Kwako nimetia saini	wanichengua kichizi

Si rahisi kuwa nayo	kama mtu wasiwasi
Utamaliza matayo	huipati 'C' licence

Kiitikio

'C' License

Driver – take hold of the stirring wheel to show me your skills
 The conductor tells me he cannot outwit your style
 I confess there's none like you in the immediate neighborhood
 Your license is a high class one, you really sweated hard for it
 Your style of driving is no joke, a ride that has no pause

A startling driver you are, you don't visibly move you hands
 The sensation of your touch I have noticed, no others can give
 The stirring wheel never shaky, the go is smooth in your hands
 To me you're number one, I praise you not for nothing

Upon climbing the mountain, you never slacken the speed
 A startled passenger wonders what tricks you use!
 Oh, how you change the gears with ease inside
 You never forget the corners or by-pass the stops
 I'll meet you at the stop, it's a chance I wont lose!

How much fare should I pay you my comforter?
 The pleasure is novel to me (and) the longing weighs heavily
 Your art (of love-making) bewitches me, yet you give it only once
 I have signed my love to you, (for) you stir my sensation like crazy

**It is not easy to copy his art of driving if you are a mediocre
 Even if you try hard, you will never get the 'C' licence.**

Chorus

A multifunctional musical genre like 'taarab' with its economic, social, cultural, and political concomitants and its interconnectedness to new media technologies impinging on it and giving it commercial advantage cannot be relegated to an 'absolute' definition. A feasible definition should take into account the varying circumstances, structures and roles determined by its concomitants and the impingement of the media.

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