

QURANIC PRINCIPLES IN DEALING WITH FAKE NEWS

Jumuah lecture by Mowlana Syed Aftab Haider on Friday 19 January 2018 (1 Jamadi-ul-Ula 1439) at the Ahlul Bait (a.s) Masjid, Ottery, Cape Town

One of the serious challenges of our time is the media, and more particularly, the free flow of information in our society. The advent of social media has propelled the seriousness of this matter to a higher level.

The problem of media is a challenge today, but it was always there, namely, how do we respond to news and information that we receive through different channels. Beyond any doubt, how we react to this news has a great impact on our life.

Most of our attitudes and the shaping of our opinions about different issues and events in society depend on this media. They shape our thoughts and opinions on who we must like and dislike and who we must support and be loyal to and vice versa. Similarly, our perception of what is right and wrong is very much connected to media.

RESPONSIBILITY IN SHARING NEWS HAS IMPACT IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

QURANIC PRINCIPLES IN DEALING WITH FAKE NEWS

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

Therefore, from very early on, the Holy Quran took this issue very seriously ie. of the influential impact of the media and our response to the news it conveys. Hence, the Holy Quran discusses this topic in great detail and establishes principles and mechanisms of what we are supposed to do in the face of propaganda and the variety of news which we are bombarded with.

In fact, the Holy Quran wants to establish a culture of how to respond to the media and news. We cannot be naïve in simply receiving news on face value. According to the Holy Quran, the Islamic society is very sensitive about media and news.

Almighty Allah (SWT) says in the Holy Quran, in verse 15 of Surah Noor (chapter 24):

“When you received it with your tongues and spoke with your mouths what you had no knowledge of, and you deemed it an easy matter while with Allah it was grievous.”

In simple terms, Almighty Allah (SWT) cautions us about how erroneous we are when we so easily (without thinking) pass on information for which we have no knowledge of. To bring the

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

message of this verse home, we receive a WhatsApp message, and we simply forward it to our entire contact list without first reading the contents!!!

Almighty Allah (SWT) continues in verse 16 of Surah Noor:

“And why did ye not, when ye heard it, say? - "It is not right of us to speak of this: Glory to Allah! This is a most serious slander!"

This verse challenges our conscience of why we did not exercise caution before sharing news we are not certain about.

IGNORANT SHARING PERPETUATES NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ISLAM

This matter is not only about shaping opinion in socio-political issues. It also enters the territories of religion. An example is when you start giving stories which have no basis, thereby making fun of a belief system.

Also, when you think you are supporting a religion, like carelessly forwarding the fake messages which float around of people burning the Quran and then all of a sudden he received the punishment of Almighty Allah (SWT). This is completely untrue and then we think we are supporting the Holy Quran by sharing a lie. Alhamdu Lillah, the Holy Quran does not need false support!

The religion of Islam is based upon logic, reasoning, evidence and intellectual arguments. Islam does not require fictional stories and conspiracies! Perpetuating such behaviour simply advances a negative perception of the low scholarly level of Muslims. We think we will attract people to Islam but instead it has the opposite effect, with people of logic and rationality making a mockery of this narrow thinking.

There are some important guiding principles we see in the Holy Quran when it comes to receiving news, be it social news, political news, religious news, sports news or whatever other news you can think of. How should we react? There is a 4 step methodology that the Holy Quran prescribes in dealing with news:

1. Take a step back
2. Validate the source
3. Be conscious of mischief-makers

4. Analyse and evaluate the news

STEP 1: TAKE A STEP BACK

The first guiding principle which the Holy Quran establishes in this regard is to take a step back when news is received. The Quranic guidance is to not rush to respond and create the incorrect conclusion.

The Holy Quran mentions that humanity has a very serious weakness, namely, always in a rush! Verse 37 of Surah Anbiyaa (chapter 21) refers:

Man is created of haste

Furthermore, Rasulullah (SAWA) says in numerous Hadith narrations that the one area where people will destroy themselves is in needing to always be in rush.

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

There is the very beautiful story of Nabi Sulayman (a.s) about the Queen of Saba, where the Holy Quran narrates that there was a beautiful bird which brought the news that the people of Saba (Yemen) do not worship Almighty Allah (SWT) but instead, they worship the sun. How did Nabi Sulayman react to this worrying news? Did he immediately call for war on these people who supposedly do not believe in God?

The Holy Quran narrates in verse 26 of Surah Naml (chapter 27) that Nabi Sulayman (a.s) advised that they will not accept on face value. They will wait and see if they are truthful or lying, before jumping to conclusions:

Nabi Sulayman said: "Soon shall we see whether thou hast told the truth or lied!"

STEP 2: VALIDATE THE SOURCE

The second guiding principle which the Holy Quran establishes around media (after advising us not to rush to conclusions) is to look at the source of the news! Whoever brings the news can be biased and thereby influence the news. Verse 6 of Surah Hujraat (chapter 49 of the Holy Quran) establishes the critical guiding principle of doing your research on the source of the news before accepting:

QURANIC PRINCIPLES IN DEALING WITH FAKE NEWS

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

“O you who believe! If an evil-doer comes to you with a report, look carefully into it, lest you harm a people in ignorance, then be sorry for what you have done.”

This verse is about Walid ibn Aqabah, whom Rasulullah (SAWA) sent to collect Zakah from a particular region. He did not have good relations with the people of this tribe whom he was sent to collect taxes from. He saw from a distance that these people are coming forward, thinking that they are advancing on him to kill him. So he decided from the distance to rather turn back instead.

However, these people were coming forward to welcome him since he is being sent by Rasulullah (SAWA), but remember that Walid's commitment to Rasulullah (SAWA) is fragile at best, so this reaction is not unbecoming of his character! The Holy Quran calls this man a Faasiq (transgressor).

Walid ibn Aqabah returns to Rasulullah (SAWA) claiming that these people are rebels and they refused to pay Zakah. Now, the point is that innocent people would have been attacked if Rasulullah (SAWA) would have reacted on this fake news from Walid ibn Aqabah!

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

So, the source of news is crucial to understand before accepting or sharing, as it could be influenced by their own agendas.

STEP 3: BE CONSCIOUS OF MISCHIEF-MAKERS

The third guiding principle which the Holy Quran establishes around media is to be conscious of Fitna (mischief-makers). This is a very important issue. The primary purpose of these people is to create chaos in the society. They have ulterior motives and we should not be fooled. There are plenty of examples of this from those who exploit Shia-Sunni differences.

There are 2 beautiful verses explaining this in the Holy Quran, specifically verses 204 and 205 of Surah Baqarah (chapter 2):

“There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life May dazzle thee, and he calls Allah to witness about what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies.”

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

Almighty Allah (SWT) is saying in this verse that there are people who will blow you away with their beautiful speech, while their hearts are polluted with devious intent that only Allah (SWT) is witness to. Verse 205 reads as follows:

“When he turns his back, His aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But Allah loveth not mischief.”

Important to note that this is very different from a Faasiq (transgressor) bringing you news, as described above. The person described in these 2 verses is someone who appears as if he is doing reform and has something genuine to offer. So you will be impressed by his speech and be swept off your feet by his ideas. However, you do not know his sinister intentions.

STEP 4: ANALYSE AND EVALUATE THE NEWS

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Monday, 22 January 2018 14:53 -

The fourth guiding principle which the Holy Quran establishes around media is to analyse the news ie. ask yourself - is this news possible? This means that we should analyse the news even after:

1. Taking a step back (criterion 1)
2. Confirming that it comes from an authentic source (criterion 2), and
3. Confirming there are no ulterior motives (criterion 3).

The reason for this is due to the fact that incorrect news could sometimes come from reliable sources too. So, if you study the conditions and context of the story, you realise that this news is not possible. It is simply not real...

Almighty Allah (SWT) explains this in the Holy Quran, in verse 83 of Surah Nisa (chapter 4), that we should seek clarification from those qualified leaders and Almighty Allah (SWT) and His Rasul (SAWA) to validate it, before publicising news that we receive.

“And when there comes to them news of security or fear they spread it abroad; and if they had referred it to the Messenger and to those in authority among them, those among them who can search out the knowledge of it would have known it, and were it not for the grace of Allah upon you and His mercy, you would have certainly followed the Shaitan save a few”

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The concluding point that I want to draw your attention to is that we require vision and insight when it comes to media and our response. Otherwise, this powerful tool can destroy us politically, socially and even ideologically (Aqeedah). We see this constantly on the different social media platforms, whereby you would receive a good message with the name of Rasulullah (SAWA) or the Imams ascribed to it. However, no reference is made to its source.

While the message may be good, it is a fabrication to simply attribute a message to our infallibles if it cannot be traced to authentic sources of Hadith. Therefore, we need to be extra cautious, by validating the authenticity before pressing the forward button.

TAQWA SHOULD BE OBSERVED IN SHARING INFORMATION

The Holy Quran is very sensitive about this and we are answerable to Almighty Allah (SWT) for the communications we share. This is again the spirit of Taqwa that needs to be imbibed in every aspect of our lives.

Our commitment to Taqwa requires the caution from us when we are dealing with the sharing of information, particularly social media.

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The events in the Islamic Republic of Iran a few weeks ago show us how their enemies were able to provoke certain elements towards violence and destruction of property. The background to this all is what I elaborated in the first khutbah, in the light of the verses of guidance cited from the Holy Quran.

However, it does not mean that social media should be suspended, as it is a very powerful tool. We need to therefore act responsibly to this challenge of cautious use of social media in our times.

SECOND KHUTBAH – THE UGLY FACE OF RACISM DOES NOT DIE

Last week we saw this plague of racism again emerging from different corners. What emerged from the White House last week from this so-called head of the new world civilization with his repugnant, racist comments about people of colour and African countries were of the ugliest, most vulgar magnitude.

This is the exposure of the reality in USA, and our beloved leader, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei very beautifully said that he does not believe that the USA has suddenly changed drastically for the worse. Rather, he says, the ugly face is more exposed now with Trump whereas it was concealed in a beautiful envelope previously.

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This disease of racism is so deep-rooted, as we can see in our own country, where schools are not ready to accept students, and they are shamelessly trying to hide behind the excuse of language to exclude some sectors of society. This is still a deep-rooted problem after such a long struggle against racism and Apartheid.

Racism remains a global curse, be it from the White House in Washington DC or be it at a communal level in the suburbs of South Africa. We pray that the Quranic message of humanity overpowers the scourge of racism, to bury it once and forever!