

Journalism Ethics and Media Practices

(A Critical Analysis in the Light of Islamic Methodology of News-Formation and its Dissemination)

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Media Landscape in Pakistan:

Pakistan has one of the most vibrant and diverse media landscapes in South Asia. Media enjoys freedom of expression to a large extent despite direct and indirect pressures from Government and other political stakeholders. Around 117 television channels telecast entertainment programs, news & current affair political talk shows and satire round the clock. These TV channels have combined viewership of 124 million.

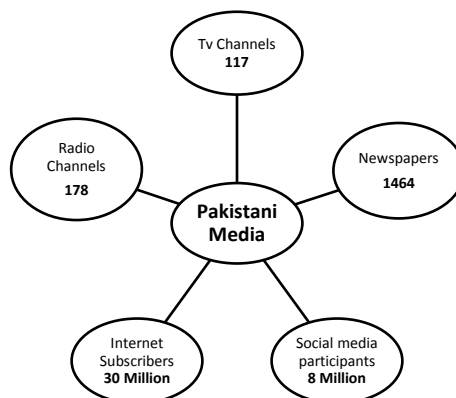


Figure 1: Facts taken from PEMRA

Besides, 138 commercial and 40 non-commercial radio channels are licensed by PEMRA.¹

In addition to the mass media, there are 30 million internet subscribers, out of whom 8 million are part of the social media networks. More than 80% of these 'Internet users' spend more than one hour on the social media networks every day.²

Government Regulations and Code of Conduct of Media for Religion as defined by PEMRA

The Authority formulated underneath an Ordinance has now been made a

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statutory corporate body with the passing of PEMRA Amendment Act by Pakistan Parliament.

To carry out its duty effectually, PEMRA has articulated regulations, rules, and code of ethics for certifying and running of Satellite TV, Cable TV supply, FM Radio and other electronic media technologies. Laws are developed after discussion with stakeholders and with the comparative study of international media regulatory practices. Council of Complaints encompassing representatives of the people have been set up at capitals of the Federal and Provinces to compensate public complaints against any violation of code of ethics by media broadcasters. The Councils are independent public forums with no government involvement or role.

PEMRA has strict policy for religion related matters and states that:

- Anyone who passes insulting comments about any religion, community or a sector or uses graphics or words condescending religious sects and ethnic groups or endorses communal and sectarian attitudes or promotes crime and violence, would face legal actions.³

Defining Media Ethics:

The concept of ethical journalism was proposed 150 years ago when a conflict arose between the British government and *The Times of London* after which an effort was made to outline the responsibilities and rights of journalists. In February 1852, two articles were presented by the editor of the newspaper that gave the idea and guiding principles of journalism. He defined the underlined principle of telling truth as, “*The duty of the journalist is the same as that of the historian — to seek out the truth, above all things, and to present to his readers the truth as he can attain it*”.

He stated that a journalist should perform his duty independent of pressure of government “journalist is to act independent of the state without any binding relation nor can he surrender to the supremacy of any overpowering authority in any shape or manner”. In order to make its application sure, the press has to act unrestricted in the investigation of truth and application of fixed ethics to the dealings of the world”.

By the untiring efforts of editors, publishers and journalists the codes of ethics and a standard procedure to act on was developed for protection and independence of journalists and hence journalism emerged to be the “fourth pillar of the estate”.

Over the past 100 years many principles and codes of journalism have been developed by different countries and their forums depending upon the political, social and cultural needs. These codes are voluntary in

nature and aspire in provision of an ambitious outline for the journalists to act on.

Nexus between Media Ethics and Islam:

It is difficult to distinguish between the liability or accountability and obligation or responsibility in the framework of Islamic law. Every human has his own responsibilities and obligation to attend to and pursue the righteous path (*al-sirāt al-mustaqīm*) that can also be said as the ethical perceptions to be followed in order to obey the divine power. The Qur'an illustrates that the righteousness of a path and the realization that God is present, and He is the Almighty and powerful, comes from the common sense. The Qur'an gives the description about itself using the word remembrance and sustains its most important function of making people remember about the reality of the Divinity- that God is present with everything that his presence implies.

The Qur'an asserts that the only way to distinguish among truth is by *Fikr* (thought), *Aql* (reason) and *Dhikhr* (commemoration). Keeping this context in mind we can say that Divinity is what is true and true is what is Divinity. But in order to recognize the Divine we ought to have the values that make the Divine what He is, values such as fairness, mercy, justice, goodness, compassion.⁴ Obligation to do well to others quantifies as a responsibility to accept and act upon the virtues of God.⁵

The Qur'an states that the urge to follow the right path along with many other attributes of the *sirāt* are present in the inner part of the human mind. As when God created human, he put a natural liking in humans by which they are subjected towards doing good by nature and by heart: *"And so, set the force steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with natural disposition intuition (fiṭrah) which God has instilled into humans" ...*⁶

The Qur'an has told that the only way to stay on the path of God and truth is only by thinking, pondering and reflecting.

Technology, Digital Media and Religion:

We are living in the age of digital media where we are provided with tones of technology that connects us and helps us cope with the world and has great impact on our lives. It is very interesting to see how technology has helped religion. The technology we use today is useful and beneficial in a lot of ways that can help us flourish, be better and facilitate us in communicating with our target audience. By using the right modes of communication, we can:

1. Muster up the people who are faithful to us.
2. Use all social platforms to expand our religious beliefs.
3. Connect people together using religion no matter where they live.

4. Make religious practices and codes of conducts easier for other people to follow.
5. Provide opportunities to grow and reach out to religious and spiritual scholars for enlightenment.

The technology when used through a proper platform and with appropriate channels can be more advantageous.

Benefits of Technology in Promoting Ethical Journalism:

1. Accessible to Diversified Communities

Technology has enabled journalists to link ties to the people online no matter where they are. Journalists today make themselves available 24/7 keeping their duty as the watchdog of the society. They are able to report and cover any news at any place, record any wrong proceedings and oppression. Technology has made the contact between a journalist and a source easier.

2. Distance Does not Matter Anymore

Journalism today is much more easy and rapid in response than before where the response to any international comment or action about Muslims or people in general would take time. Today the journalists are more vigilant and quicker in responding to anything wrong in the world. This can be well understood by the response of people and journalists around the world against the blasphemous cartoon competition that was to be held in Netherland. Journalists from Pakistan quickly responded to it and made it clear that the Muslim *Ummah* does not accept this behavior.⁷

3. Reputational Shift

Technology is helping us break the old-fashioned stereotypes in the minds of the people about Islam. Like the idea that women in Islam are not allowed to enjoy free will and they are oppressed in the name of religion or shattering the national image of a country thought to be extremist in its proceedings. Telling people that Muslim community and the religion Islam is not a liability to anything or anyone.

4. Increased Importance of Statistics

Social media with its powerful impact has started to affect the online matrices and bend in the favor of religious groups also. Today, journalists have the power to state stats in the answer to any attack on the Muslim community. For example, the total number of Muslims killed by the Christians to show the damage non-Muslims are doing to us, the stats about the number of people converted to Islam by free will in order to show that people accept the teachings of Islam knowing that it is the right path and are not forced by anyone, the number of times hate speech was targeted towards Muslims etc.

5. Strategic Journalism

Many media houses have hired technical experts to operate and handle social and digital media strategically. Some media houses want to improve their presence online, manage their social media strategies to get more people involved in a healthy discussion or event. Careful planning and implementation of ethical codes of journalism to do more effective communication.

Ethical Laws from The Qur'an for the Digital Age :

The Qur'an is a complete code of conduct for human beings in every possible way. It also provides us with ethical principles to follow through our life and can be unanimously applied to every single person in this world (Hourani 1985). The Qur'an states for injustice that: *"And God does not desire for human beings to suffer from injustice"*.⁸ Qur'an has unique, clear and imperial way of saying things to the people. The Qur'an proclaims: *"O you who believe, be persistent and stand firm in justice, bearing witness for God, even if it be against yourselves or your parents or your close ones. Whether rich or poor, God is their sustainer. Refrain from following your whims and desires lest you fail to be just, for if you fail to uphold justice, God is fully aware of what you do"*.⁹

By this, we can conclude that by the Islamic perspective every Muslim must urge for a similar and universal moral ground by which they can relate to every other human being in this world.¹⁰ This explains the notion that Islam is a religion that addresses to humans of every color, race, culture or norm and can be regarded as a religion of universal characteristics that benefits to all humanity. The Qur'an addresses all human kinds and not to any specific group at various places¹¹ and that it's an epitome of blessings and a source of mercy that covers everyone.¹²

The Qur'an puts a great stress upon the fact that the essential part in pursuance of Islam is the attenuation of ones' self from injustice and connecting to mercy and peace. So, every Muslim is to extend the mercy that God has bestowed upon him onto other humans. Mercy and peace are closely related to each other – mercy is the bliss of peace and peace is Divine mercy. The teachings of Islam urges Muslims to get to know each other to be more aware of their problems and common goals, to be sympathetic, compassionate towards one another, to be merciful and empathetic towards one another. And in the age of digitalization it is much easier and more attainable to get to know the different urbanized societies of the world with different cultural, societal, regional, consciousness and epistemological approaches. Every society has the tendency to gaze upon the other without being forced by anyone. In such a flourishing environment we cannot afford Islam to be interpreted on the basis of past

models and legal rulings. Rather we should use The Qur'an for defining ethical course, restoring the moral motion and for future horizons. The Qur'an has revealed to humans not to be abusive and derogatory towards others in any condition.

The main concept behind all this is not just for human beings to struggle and endeavor on a path that leads to blessings of God and get rewarded at the Day of Judgment. But this is not the only thing that God intends humans to do, He wants us to care about the basic rights of the people and their goodness, their social and societal progress, the flexibility and facilitation of the system that governs every person. The Qur'an persistently put emphasis on the fact that people are to be blessed by peace, safety, providing humans shelter and a homeland, serenity, financial issues, no cruelty for the people who are good. *"For your Lord knows who strays from the path, and God knows those who are rightly guided"*.¹³

The relevance of "Mass Media and Mass Society" describes the role of media in our lives as important, both socially and culturally. Before the introduction of mass media to the world everything was explained and understood in its visual and written depiction that were clearer as crystal and implicit. However, the media today has become a power house with the ability to highlight something as the most important and to devalue and undermine some issue as it had no value at all.

It was believed that media connects different institutions together rather it appears that the media is unable to bridge itself with the institution of religion and the bond between religion and media is getting weaker day by day. Media needs to be responsible for all the falsely represented and broadcasted stories of different religious groups and make sure that corrections and retractions are made, and equal weightage is given to every religious group without being discriminated. The biggest example of media being unfair and unjust to religious groups is that, Muslims are treated as terrorists and extremists in majority of the stories published worldwide. Usually, in a news about a Muslim and a Christian, a Christian is portrayed as a good human being and a Muslim is shown as a bad person. Example of such happenings is Anders Berivik¹⁴ case, who killed a total number of 77 people in 2011 Norway attacks, was not designated as a Christian Terrorist by media despite of the fact that he identified himself as the protector of the European Christianity. Later on, he was denounced from being Christian by a scholar. Same is the case with the New Zealand Christchurch attack (Norman 2019)¹⁵ in which 49 muslims were killed with dozens injured where the attacker was regarded as a white supremacist instead of an extremist or a terrorist. The reaction

of the media was disturbing and unacceptable because of the fact the killer live streamed everything to the viewers. This clearly displays the evil intentions of the attacker and is a live evidence to the fact that he was terrorizing but still he was not regarded as a terrorist. Media played irresponsible role in that incident. Before it was confirmed that the attacker was a white Christian, many media groups claimed it to be a Muslim terrorist. Later, when confirmed, they did not call that Christian as a terrorist but a mentally retarded person.

This phenomenon can be well understood by taking the western cultural norms into consideration by which all Christians are good and Muslims are bad, and the white supremacy and superiority must be protected and preserved at any cost. This can also be seen in Donald Trump's Anti-Muslim Statements during Presidential Election Campaigns and the Muslim ban that he imposed on many Muslim countries. These are a few strong illustrations of Islamophobia being prevalent in the west.

With a live worldwide telecast of many Christian rituals, religious procedures and weddings they say that they are the ones being neglected and badly misinterpreted by the world. Whereas, they are the only ones who get to make their complains vocal to the higher authorities while Muslims go unheard and unattended to the point they are in grieve danger or are attacked and killed.¹⁶

Islamic Media Charter:

The first charter of Islamic media was given in the International Islamic Media Conference in the light of which all the activities were to be carried out as well as to be considered as a source of obligations and rights of the journalists.¹⁷

Article 1

- ❖ It states that every Muslim should consolidate the faith, ethical principles and values of every Muslim individual and work towards accomplishing amalgamation of Islamic personality of an individual.
- ❖ Set out truth and true facts keeping the Islamic framework and rules of conduct.
- ❖ Understand and perform their duties towards others' liberties and basic human rights.

Article 2

- ❖ Muslim media personal should put their energies to combine, unite and uphold different ranks of Muslims and promote brotherhood, acceptance and wisdom in solving the problems.
- ❖ They should show full commitment to fascism, racism, anger, colonialism and combat their all forms.

- ❖ To combat Zionism and its colonialist policy of creating settlements as well as its ruthless suppression of the Palestinian people. Islamic media men should be careful towards any anti-Islamic propaganda or agenda.

Article 3

- ❖ Censorship should be done for all the broadcasted and published material that can be or posse to be harmful or bad influence for the *Ummah* and are damaging to the values of Islamic charter.
- ❖ They should adopt an elegant way to carry out their responsibilities that are not compromising the integrity of the traditions of Islam. Neither publish nor broadcast anything that goes against the morality of the public and violates the rules of carrying out procedures.
- ❖ This also includes anything that arises a wave of terror, discomfort or provoke any inner instincts of the viewers. By which any advertisement obscene, insulting to the Muslims or otherwise must not be aired.

Article 4

- ❖ Islamic Journalists should defend Muslims point of view and be devoted towards the dissemination of *D'awah* in order to elucidate issues related to Islam.
- ❖ Keenness to spread Arabic language, Islamic civilization, history of Islam among Muslims and non-Muslims should be there.
- ❖ They should keep *Shar'iah* alive amidst the man-made principles and laws.

Essential Values of Journalists in the Light of Islamic Media Charter:

Islam, as a religion providing code of ethics for life, stresses upon the basic virtues of humanity including objectivity and un-biasness to seek for the truthful information, hence, Muslim journalists have a better reason to adopt and opt for these ethical values than the Western journalists. The following four principles are declared as the basis of ethical journalism by the society and Islam stresses on their usage and practice in media.

1. Seeking for Truth and Reporting It

The most important value of journalism is to report fairly and truthfully and every journalist should be spirited and honest to report, interpret and to gather true information by all means.

A journalist should:

- Be responsible for his information to be accurate and verified prior releasing it and must use authentic sources.¹⁸
- Provide complete context and ensure removal of any generalization or falsification from the story.¹⁹

- Give updated information about the story and must gather it in a correct and legal manner.
- Give public a chance to judge the authentication and motivation of the source by providing clear identification of the source.²⁰
- Confirm the motives of the source before promising anonymity to him. Also give explanation to the public for granting anonymity, if needed.²¹
- Evade the usage of undercover methods of gathering information about anything unless or until the conventional method of yielding information is not effective.
- Give voice to the voiceless and be strict and upfront with those who are accountable, even with the ones in power.
- Recognize and understand their role as a watchdog of the society.
- Try his best to avoid stereotyping.
- Never alter the context, information and facts, deliberately.
- Avoid plagiarism and give credit to those who deserve.

2. Avoid Risks and Protect Others from Hārm

Journalists should;

- Always keep their ethics in mind and treat human beings with the respect they deserve.
- Understand that pursuit of news does not give them license to ignore or be intrusive that might result in any potential harm or discomfort to anyone.
- Be sensitive towards those who get affected by the news. Consider them as human beings with feelings for those who are experiencing an unfortunate event like victims of acid attack, sex crimes, juveniles, minorities with different cultures etc.
- Be ready to face any consequence when publishing about the ones with greater control or power and influence.
- Avoid unnecessary curiosity about anything even if it intrigues them very much.
- Never declare anyone as a criminal before a fair trial and maintain the public's right to information.
- Have a long-term approach to any information you are giving and stay updated about it.

3. Objectivity and Credibility

The foremost duty of the journalist is to serve the general public to its highest potential. A journalist must;

- Avoid any personal interest and must openly publish any conflict that the public should know about.

- Say NO to any material things that might come in the way of you serving your duty rightfully and with honesty.
- Never compromise on their integrity, objectivity and credibility by engaging in unnecessary activities outside their profession.
- Deny any favors to donors, internal interests, external pressure and advertisers.
- Give clear descriptions about what news is and what advertisement is.

4. Transparency and Accountability

Journalists have ethical obligation to explain their actions and decisions they make, to the public.

Journalists should:

- Boost a dialogue between the public regarding the contents of the news, its coverage and journalistic ethical practices.
- Give a quick response to clarify and to give accurate and fair information.
- Accept if and when wrong, make corrections and clarify their stance.
- Never support or promote unethical journalism or any conduct that can be regarded as unethical or illegal.
- Follow the rules and standards they expect others to follow.

Challenges, Problems and Suggestions:

The paper presented a brief overview of journalistic ethics in the light of Islam and the possibilities to adopt digital media. Considering the amount of research conducted upon the said issue there is still a lot of window for betterment and change in it and above all the absence of practice of the laws and the ethics by the journalists needs serious applications. So far, no enough efforts are being done by the Muslims that may result in the end of our dependence on the information system operated by the West. AP, UPI, AFP and Reuters are the news agencies we rely on for authentic international news sources. 90% news of every Muslim newspapers in Arabic, English, Persian, and Urdu depend on western news agencies for information. Reliance on western news agencies makes it very difficult to apply Islamic laws, norms, principles and practices to be observed in the journalism.

Therefore, in order to eliminate the reliability of information from the western sources we have to develop alternate reliable sources that can help us in the accumulation and dissemination of news and observance of ethics on our terms that include the Islamic way also. If, Muslims are willing to show enthusiasm and readiness in mustering courage to stand against the western system and develop an alternate of information and sources there is a chance that all the Muslims that were neglected in the

past will adhere together and emerge as a power that practices ethical journalism at their own terms as defined by Islamic Law.

Muslim media practitioners should develop a structure that ensures the independence of every journalist and can enjoy healthy and helpful exchange of ideas, expertise and experiences between different journalists, magazines and newspapers of the Muslim world. Thus, a central group of Muslim media practitioners from numerous Muslim countries will pour their wisdom into the same think tank to benefit none other than Muslims themselves. To formulate a systematic and detailed approach to the process of mass communication we ought to create a group of experts to work in harmony with the already defined framework of the social and behavioral sciences to give them an Islamic approach as well. There are numerous training centers for journalists in the world but there are none who specifically focus on the Islamic aspects. Therefore, training sessions of Muslim journalists should be carried out to introduce them to the professional code of journalistic ethics and important aspects of development. An Islamic Institute of Mass Communication and Mass Media Research should be developed to perform important tasks other than training of journalists.

1. Regional and worldwide directory of journalists of the Muslim world.
2. Elaborative and Up-to-date bibliography of already existing literature on the relation and collaboration of media of Muslim world.
3. Gathering, writing and introducing literature that explains and elaborates the history of Islamic communication, methodologies to carry out communications and a critical examination of aspects of contemporary approaches.
4. Preparing books, articles and editorials on the problems and matters that Muslim journalists and media confronted in the past associated with their journalistic duties, assimilation, dissemination, editorial tasks, advertising and with the practical usage of communication technologies.
5. Formulating a group specifically for the aspect of media monitoring to monitor the western media's misrepresentation of Muslim nation and Islam on the whole as well as for assessing the relationship of government and press in the Muslim countries.
6. International and regional conferences and seminars should be organized to exchange a healthy exchange of experiences and thoughts between non- Muslim and Muslim journalists, so the non-Muslim journalists also start to appreciate the Islamic code of ethics.

For a workable framework of Islamic codes of ethics a few goals are to be kept in mind. Formation of an active Muslim academicians and

practitioners' forum should be done for the co-operation and co-ordination of Muslim organizations, journalists and practitioners with that of the non-Muslim ones about the religion, norms, culture and media. This forum could later be turned into an institute where Muslim journalists and researchers are given training so they can play a key role in the uplifting of Islamic journalistic standards.

Conclusion:

Shari'ah states the moral ethics and absolutes to be followed and is a complete guide line to act upon. The Qur'an gives the validation of morality and ethics and affirms that these qualities are the optimum requirements of beauty, divinity and goodness. Every example in the The Qur'an that illustrates the moral bounds, morality and absolute moderation forms the basis of Islamic Law. Everything that is defined in The Qur'an is not just a law given to the human beings to follow and act upon, rather, it is a moderated set of rules that are reciprocated, proportionated and tested through the cultural and social consciousness. The early generations gave their interpretations of rulings and jurisdictions as Islamic Law but today journalists fulfill the ethical teachings of God in their own way that are defined by their very own epistemological understanding and what they consider is right to do in their own environment in which they dwell and prepare their own survival kit of morality considering the parameters and conditions their society provides them.

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