Mohammad A. Siddiqi

This article presents a summary of existing codes of media ethics and analyzes their impact on mass media practices. It then attempts to develop an Islamic perspective of mass media ethics by focusing on the moral guidelines provided by Quran and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (the Sunnah). The paper also examines the issues, problems, and challenges in operationalizing these guidelines into a workable code of ethics. At the end specific guidelines have been presented to make Muslim media practitioners aware and interested in these media ethics. Some discussion has also been made about the ways of enforcing these code of ethics.

It is my contention that mass media appear to be more practical than abstract and philosophical. However, both news and entertainment convey, reinforce, and are based on certain beliefs and value system. The epistemological and the ethical foundations of contemporary mass media practices are deeply rooted in the western ideologies and philosophies. The major motive behind all mass media structures, practices and processes is based on sales values and governed by the market mechanism.1 Media code of ethics and watchdog mechanism are ignored by the media practitioners because they contradict the prevailing social order and hinder the pursuit of private good. The situation in Muslim countries, or of Muslim media practitioners, is no different from that of the western media.

Various forms of mass media ethics pertaining to the rights, responsibilities, freedom, and regulation of the press have been debated in European cultures since the introduction of the press in the 15th and early 16th centuries. Most of these debates focused on two areas: professional ethics related to the training of media professionals; and normative philosophical theories of public communication which bear on the professional obligations of media practitioners.

The new information technologies of our time have tremendously increased the power and function of the mass media, and at the same time have put enormous pressure on media scholars to rethink and redefine the parameters of ethics for journalists and media practitioners. On the one hand these new technologies are democratizing the process of communication by encouraging communication between individuals, on the other hand they also provide opportunities for the rich and elite to monopolize the information and manipulate it and thus control others' destinies without their consent or even against their will. This, as an eminent communication scholar Everett Rogers notes, is an epistemological turning point in media analysis and the new communication technologies are the driving force behind this revolution.2

It is not likely that the tension between the forces of the free market place of ideas and those advocating the responsible behaviour of media practitioners is going to be resolved. There are two main reasons: because the forces of the free market place of ideas dominate the economic and consequently the political structures, and because those who advocate responsible behaviour for journalists constitute a minority and have no or only an insignificant role in the decision making process pertaining to media management and ownership. They, in the words of John C. Merrill, are the 'fossilized academics' and are an endangered species themselves.3

Merrill has divided existing media codes of ethics and responsibility into three types: that which is legally defined or determined by governments; that which is professionally defined or determined by the press itself; and that which is pluralistically defined or determined by individual journalists themselves.4 Merrill sees the third theory as the only one that is valid, meaningful, and in harmony with the values and goals of western societies, especially American society.5

In attempting to compare existing codes of ethics, Thomas W. Cooper has provided a national, ideational, historical, and linguistic context. Placing these codes within a spectrum of emphasis, Cooper illustrated some of the most important polarities by which most of the codes can be explained from 'informal' to 'formal', from 'minimal' to 'ideal', from 'material' to metaphysical', the 'inihibitive' to the 'inspirational', etc.6

While obviously there is no attempt, by western scholars, to compare these codes within the Islamic framework, Claude-Jean Bertrand has noted that the West is more concerned with ethical issues in the context of a 'free press', 'and the rest of the world is more interested in issues regarding 'justice'.7 Herbert Altschull has used loose categories of market oriented countries, Marxist, and advancing nations, and has described the articles of faith that form the basis of media codes of ethics.8

There may be numerous contexts and methodological devices by which codes may be classified. However looking at the three perspectives discussed in this article, (John C. Merrill, Thomas Cooper, and Herbert Altschull) one may conclude that most western nations, including the newly liberated nations of East Europe, are increasingly inclined towards a market based theory of responsibility in mass media which is in fact a theory of individual pluralism. Or in clearer terms: the code of ethics is what an individual journalist, or a particular media institution, or a particular society deems fit for the material benefit of the journalist, or the press, or of the society as a whole. Thus the meaning and values assigned to concepts such as news, truth, objectivity, freedom, people's right to know, and facts, may change according to particular circumstances or according to the needs and priorities of a particular society at a particular time.

This is the most that one can get from reviewing the existing literature on media ethics from western scholars' theses on this issue. Individual codes of ethics may vary from nation to nation only with respect to national priorities, linguistic constraints, cultural diversity, or the type of political structure.

Despite efforts to draw up an internationally agreed code of ethics, in practical terms there exist different codes of journalistic ethics in many nations of the east, west, north and south. The process of mass communication is dictated by a journalist's own vision of what can be most readily sold to the public, and in what form. That is why there are 'codes without conduct, technology without humanity, theory without reality [practice], global change without personal change, and personal ethics, without world awareness.'9

An Islamic perspective

In practice today there is no journalistic code of ethics based on the principles of Islam, and few scholars have attempted to define an Islamic framework for mass media ethics.10 However, their thinking did not go beyond academic discussions. That is why the Muslim Ummah of more than one billion has no control over sources of information and the way it want to disseminate news despite having more than 600 daily newspapers, about 1500 weeklies, 1200 monthly news and views magazines, and about 500 miscellaneous Muslim publications.11

It is difficult for a researcher to find a well defined Islamic code of journalistic ethics. One can find press codes in Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Egypt, maybe in Iran, and a few more Muslim countries, but most of these reflect, to a great extent, the same secular bias that is part of the existing code of ethics in most other countries. The first Asian Islamic Conference organized by the Mecca-based World Muslim League in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1978 decided that co-ordination should be developed between Muslim journalists to offset and counter the Western monopoly of the mass media and its anti Islamic propaganda.

The first International Islamic News Agency (IINA) was established by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1979 with its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, but as Schleifer has noted, 'The most poorly served IINA objectives is its very first one - to consolidate and safeguard the rich cultural heritage of Islam... A more significant limitation to IINA coverage, from a Muslim perspective, is the relatively low amount of intrinsically Islamic news content.'12

The first International Conference of Muslim Journalists held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1981 endorsed a covenant for Muslim media professionals emphasizing that: Islamic rules of conduct should form the basis for all Muslim media practitioners in their journalistic endeavours, and Muslim media should work towards achieving integration of the Muslim individual's personality. It was stated that the consolidation of faith of the Muslim individual in Islamic values and ethical principles should be the main obligation of Muslim media.13

However, none of the above mentioned efforts could lead to the development, and more importantly, the practice of an Islamic code of ethics among the Muslim journalists. The reasons being: lack of support from Muslim governments; lack of interest and enthusiasm by Muslim journalists themselves; and lack of support from Muslim scholars as well Muslim society in general. Even the many Islamic magazines and newspapers have not been able to demonstrate that what they practice is inherently different from the secular media. As Schleifer has observed:

'The reverse-secularism of Western and Islamic Movement journalism insists that religion is worthy of reporting only in the political domain, and a political domain of confrontation. The specific danger of "Islamic journalism" to date is that the journalist substitutes the life and activities of the various Islamic movements for the life and activities of the much broader Islamically

conscious society... of which the political movements are but a small part. When the "Islamic journalist" substitutes the life and drama of Islamic movements for the life and drama of Islamic society, he not only over politicizes Islam but he invariably becomes side-tracked into the same sort of surface reporting of organized political life in the Muslim world that characterizes the secular press and ends up even reporting poorly on many political and public developments of profound importance to Muslims.'14

The above statement is a true reflection of many Muslim magazines such as Impact International of London, The Minaret and The Message, both of the USA, Takbir of Pakistan, Radiance of Delhi, and even Al-Dawah of Egypt. It is evident that an Islamic code of journalistic ethics is inevitable if Muslims wish to have their own information system and also wish to see it play an important and effective role in the flow of news and information across the continents.

Basis for an Islamic Code of ethics

Since a journalist's foremost concern is the dissemination of news, we have to agree upon a definition of news that is permissible within the framework of Quran and Sunnah. Not only that, we have also to consider a process of news gathering, news making and news disseminating that is acceptable within an Islamic framework. And in order to compete with the existing information orders we have to provide theoretical foundations and arguments as well a driving force that will ensure its implementation among Muslim journalists throughout the world.

Before defining news and attempting to develop an Islamic code of ethics, let us briefly discuss the basis of the Islamic moral system because it plays a very important role in the realization of the Islamic worldview within which a Muslim journalist has to operate and which is inherently different from the secular or Western worldview.

The central force in the Islamic moral system is the concept of Tawhid - the supremacy and sovereignty of one God. Tawhid also implies unity, coherence, and harmony between all parts of the universe. Not only this, but the concept of Tawhid signifies the existence of a purpose in the creation and liberation of all human kind from bondage and servitude to multiple varieties of gods. The concept of the hereafter becomes a driving force in committing to one God, and the inspiration as well definitive guidelines are provided by the traditions and the life of the Prophet (PBUH).

A journalist who uses his/her faculty of observation, reason consciousness, reflection, insight, understanding and wisdom must realize that these are the Amanah (trust) of God and must not be used to injure a human soul for the sake of self-promotion or for selling the news, rather, as Dilnawaz Siddiqui has noted these are to be used in arriving at truth.15 A journalist must not ignore God's purpose in creating this universe and various forms of life.

Explaining the implications of Tawhid, Hamid Mowlana has noted that the responsibility of a Muslim journalist and the Muslim mass media system would be:

'to destroy myths. In our contemporary world these myths may include power, progress, science, development, modernization, democracy, achievement, and success. Personalities as they represent these must not be superhumanized and superdefined... Under the principle of Tawhid another fundamental consideration in communication [another important duty of Muslim journalists] becomes clear: the destruction of thought structures based on dualism, racialism, tribalism, and familial superiority... One of the dualisms according to this principle, is the secular notion of the separation of religion and politics.'16

Another guiding principle in the development of an Islamic code of journalistic ethics is the concept of social responsibility. As mentioned earlier, the social responsibility theory on which secular or Western media practices are based is rooted in pluralistic individualism. Whereas the Islamic principle of social responsibility is based on the concept of amar bi al-Maruf wa nahi an al-munkar or commanding right and prohibiting wrong'. This implies that it is the responsibility of every individual and the group, especially the institutions of social or public communication such as the press, radio, television, and cinema, to prepare individuals and society as a whole to accept Islamic principles and act upon them.

Throughout Islamic history many institutions as well as channels of mass communications such as mosques, azan, and Friday khutba have used this concept of social responsibility to mobilize public opinion and persuade individuals to work for the collective good of society in general and for their own individual pursuit of good in this world and the hereafter. The Islamic revolution in this country has demonstrated well the strength of such uses of non-traditional means of public communication.

However, in a highly individualistic society of ours the press seems to play the opposite role of amar bi Munkar wa nahi an al Maruf. Whether Muslim or non Muslim, the media are more interested in conflict, contention, disorder, and scandal than in peace, stability, continuity, and moral conformity. Unless Muslim media practitioners accept social responsibility as a cornerstone of their profession, no Islamic code of ethics can even be realised.

The concept of news

The famous saying 'when a dog bites a man it is not news, but when a man bites a dog it is,' to a great extent is a fair description of how events are treated by editors. It speaks of the concept of social responsibility that is acceptable to the contemporary journalist. The often cited criteria of objectivity are a myth that must be scrutinized and challenged by Muslim media practitioners. Objectivity as defined by many contemporary media scholars is construed to mean:[17]

•reporting only observable phenomena;

•reporting without personal emotions;

•reporting without personal opinion;

•reporting without personal values;

•reporting all sides equally.

A robot journalist might fulfil all the above requirements, but some of them are humanly impossible. Islamic news criteria are much more practical and beneficial. Islam equally emphasizes the content, the purpose, as well as the process of news gathering within the framework of the concept of social responsibility defined above. But the pursuit of good Islam does not permit, not even to a journalist, spying or seeking to confirm suspicions, slander, circulation of rumours, or name-calling. Islam has established a strong tradition of critical evaluation of the sources of news, use of sound methods of verification, documentation of evidence and testimony wherever possible, reporting within the proper context, and treating the subject fairly.

Under certain circumstances there may be exceptions to some of these restrictions, but they should not become a routine practice or the preferred way of professional practice. Thus news may be defined as the reporting of events in a way which fulfils the needs of Muslim society and which leads to peace and stability in conformity with the moral and ethical principles of Islam.

Another major concept that determines the boundaries of a professional code of ethics for the Muslim journalist is Ummah or the community. Quran says: 'We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured among you in the sight of God is the one who is the most righteous of you' (Chapter 49, Verse 13). Thus Muslim media practitioners are supposed to serve a larger Muslim community in general and the Muslim individual of this global Muslim community in particular.

Therefore there is hardly any room for the media to propagate hatred and ridicule against other communities outside a national boundary within which the particular medium is operating. Thus in principle Muslim media should form a universal source of news and information and serve the cause of unity and equality between all humankind in general and the Muslim community in particular. It is within this framework that Muslim media should be free of regulation and censorship by the rulers of various Muslim countries because sovereignty of state belongs to God and not to a particular King or President. God Almighty, and not kings and rulers, guides the human being.

Thus an Islamic code of journalistic ethics would probably provide the best guidelines for using the mass media, to reduce and eliminate tension between nations and to serve the humanity at large by providing a fair, accurate, and just account of the world events.

Lastly, the concept of taqwa (piety) is yet another basis for developing an Islamic code of journalistic ethics. The concept of taqwa goes beyond piety, it raises a person's individual, moral, spiritual, and psychological capacity to a level that the

individual becomes immune from excessive material desires. It elevates a person to a higher level of self-awareness. Taqwa should be the underpinning element in the technical knowledge, managerial ability, scientific know-how, and communication skills of Muslim journalists. Debate and concerns about codes of ethics in contemporary mass communication focus on one issue: who should have the authority to enforce these codes of ethics: governments, media institutions, or individual journalists? The problem is not the lack of a code, rather lack of adherence to and implementation of a code. Taqwa combined with a true love of and commitment to God, consciousness of the life hereafter, and acceptance of the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad may provide the ultimate and definitive moral force to practice free and fair journalism.

Challenges, problems and suggestions

A brief conceptual framework for an Islamic code of journalistic ethics has been presented above. There is nothing new in it. It only reminds us that putting such concepts into practice is the most difficult aspect of the entire discussion. No effort has yet materialized in a viable Islamic information system that may end Muslim's reliance on Western sources of information. Muslim media practitioners are dependent on the four transnational news agencies and wire services: the AP, UPI, AFP and Reuters. In a survey conducted in 1986 it was revealed that most Muslim newspapers in Arabic, English, Persian, and Urdu base 90% of their news coverage on these four agencies. Seventy percent of foreign news bureaux in Muslim countries belong to the Western news agencies, whereas the number of Muslim countries' news bureau is hardly 5% of the total.18 Ten years on, the situation is not much different. The strong presence of Western news agencies in Muslim countries discourages media practices that do not conform to the norms of these sources of information. Therefore it is essential to develop an alternative and viable source of information that will replace reliance on sources of information whose primary objectives are in contradiction with the basic value system of Islam.

Unless Muslim media take a lead in the development of alternative sources of information, and unless they show great willingness to accommodate neglected social groups such as Muslim youth, women, children and the rural population, they will remain confined to a small audience without any practical relevance to the Muslim masses in particular and the world in general. As a consequence the desire to adhere to an Islamic code of ethics would also remain low.

It is important to note that Muslim media practitioners themselves have to develop an independent structure. Unfortunately there is very little exchange of ideas, experiences, and expertise among Muslim journalists, newspapers, and magazines. As a result, already scarce human and material resources are wasted in duplicating similar efforts. Thus a core group of Muslim media practitioners, drawn from various countries, could be formed to serve as a media think tank. Such a group should work in close co-operation with those who are actively engaged in defining an Islamic framework for other areas of study i.e. sociology, psychology, political science, philosophy, and anthropology etc., in order to develop a thorough Islamic approach to the process of mass communication.

An important aspect of the development of a professional code of journalistic ethics is the training of Muslim journalists. There are numerous training centres to train journalists in all other aspects of the job, but none where journalists can get training on specifically Islamic aspects. There is an urgent need to establish an Islamic Institute of Mass Media Research and Training. Such an institute could perform many important tasks besides just training journalists: 1) Preparation of a directory of Muslim journalists for world wide and regional co-operation; 2) Preparation of an exhaustive bibliography on the existing literature on the Muslim world media; 3) Preparation of books introducing the basic concepts in mass communication history, methodology, and process with a critical examination of the contemporary approaches; 4) Preparation of monographs on specific issues and problems faced by Muslim media and Muslim journalists related to the editorial tasks, circulation and distribution, advertisement, and effective use of new communication technologies; 5) Establishment of a media monitoring group in order to keep up with the Western media's distortion of Islam and Muslim societies as well as to monitor and assess the press-government relationship in Muslim countries; and 6) Organize regional and international seminars and conferences in which both Muslim and non-Muslim media practitioners can exchange their thoughts and experiences in order to appreciate the importance of an Islamic code of ethics for journalists.

These are few suggestions towards realizing the goal of developing a workable code of media ethics within an Islamic framework. To begin with, an active forum of Muslim media practitioners and academicians could be created to exchange information about codes of journalistic ethics in Muslim countries, and also to cooperate and co-ordinate with non-Muslim media practitioners, associations and organizations that have a concern about media, culture and religion. Such forum could later play a key role in the formation of an international institute for media training and research for Muslim journalists.

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Mohammad A. Siddiqi (PhD) is Professor of journalism and public relations at Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois; and Vice-President, American Islamic College, Chicago, USA.