



JOURNAL OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION WARFARE

Centre For Media And Information Warfare Studies

Volume 1

JUNE 2008

ISSN 1985-563X

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Journal of Media and Information Warfare is joint published by the Centre of Media and Information Warfare, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies and University Publication Centre (UPENA), Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Malaysia.

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Media Ethics: An Islamic Perspective

Dr. Muhammad Amanullah

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, although every country of the world has its own local media, the local media, such as radio, television, newspapers, etc., rarely differ from international media on points of view. This is because the local media are always exposed to and influenced by other more influential international media groups. Thus, if the international media are biased, the local media usually follow suit. The viewer then has little chance of reaching a truly objective viewpoint or the true picture of events. Likewise, the international media also culturally influence the local media. Most of the evils and shortcomings that are available in foreign international media are also available in local ones. Both Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world are affected by these evils. This situation should be corrected. Islam provides a complete set of moral ethics that can correct the shortcomings of the present media. This paper aims to discuss these moral ethics and tries to critically review seven issues of the local daily newspaper "New Straits Times" (NST) in light of these Islamic ethics. In order to accomplish these objectives, the paper analytically discusses the related verses of the Qur'an, ahadith of the Prophet (p. b. u. h.), and appropriate examples on the topic. This paper is divided into four main sections, i.e., introduction (important unethical activities of contemporary media), Islamic ethics for media, analytical review of selected features and advertisements of "New Straits Times," and some suggestions to improve the ethical condition of the contemporary media. Hopefully, if the contemporary media implement these moral ethics, it would positively contribute into uplifting of human moral character all over the world.

1. Introduction

1.1. Media, whether local or international, conventional or electronic, is important for the contemporary world that has become like a huge village where everybody can easily communicate with each other. In order to keep good and harmonious relationship among all the members of this huge village, media has a significant role to play. Although the contemporary media all over the world has been serving for the welfare of humanity, it is not free from conducting some activities that are ethically not sound. This part of the paper highlights some of these unethical activities.

1.1.1. American and other international media in the past have stereotyped some terrorist activities and accused Muslims for them without having concrete proof of them. Sometimes they act like a judge by confirming guilt for a person or group without having any judgment from a court. An important example for this stereotyping was the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal Building in 1995. American media immediately accused Muslims by saying that they have committed this crime. However, later it was proven that no Muslims were involved in it. Another example was the bombing of the twin tower of New York in 11th September 2001. American media immediately accused some Muslim groups to be behind this bombing. However, until now no concrete evidence has been found to prove this. On the contrary, several clues have indicated that it was the work of American Government and Israel, which is now supported by an organized group of American scholars.

1.1.2. Some newspapers publish articles on murder and sexual crimes in a way that provoke the readers to commit these crimes. This is done through using provocative language, or showing the criminal as a hero, or mentioning excuses and justification for committing crimes, or publishing details of the techniques used for them, or by not mentioning the prescribed punishment for a particular crime. Tabloid newspapers are appropriate examples for

this unethical activity. Some magazines, such as American Playboy, are specialized in printing naked pictures. Many regular newspapers also print either naked or semi naked female pictures. This activity actively contributes into destroying public character.

- 1.1.3. Sometimes newspapers do not consider the human rights of the criminals. They, therefore, publish the names of these criminals and print their pictures from the beginning of an incident of crime without waiting for the court decision about their crimes, which ultimately could be disproved.
- 1.1.4. Many newspapers publish advertisements for different types of products along with pictures of models and stars or other women who are not properly dressed. Unethical aspects of these advertisements are numerous. First, it is considered to be an abuse of the honor of female gender. Second, it is a kind of cheating because the advertisements should be for the products, not for these pictures. Third, the attention of the readers goes first to the pictures, through which they commit a sin. Fourth, this is a provocation for women readers to dress and pose like these pictures.
- 1.1.5. Western media strives to influence media of other countries including Muslim countries intellectually and culturally. Since the local media of most of Muslim countries are run by secular people and supported by secular governments, these media, to a great extent, work as a subordinate to other international and influential media groups in some international, cultural, intellectual, and religious issues.

2. Islamic Ethics For Media

- 2.1. Islam is considered to be the only complete code of life that provides human beings with guidelines for all aspects of life including ethics for media. Most important of these ethics are as follows:

- 2.1.1. Correspondents and other personnel who work in media should be truthful and trustworthy in their correspondence, writing, reading and transmitting news and information. (Kahil, 1985). They should not try to lie or cheat in their transmission, and likewise should not add anything from their own without having appropriate evidence for it. Allah says: "O you who believe, fear Allah and stay with truthful people." (Al-Tawbah,119). According to this verse, Muslims including correspondents and other media personnel are not allowed to lie in their news features. In a hadith the Prophet (p. b. u. h.) says: "The one who cheats is not one of us." (Tabrani in Isma'il, 1994). Telling a lie or adding something from the correspondent without any proof is considered to be a kind of cheating, which is not allowed according to this hadith.
- 2.1.2. They should be just, neutral and positive in their transmission of news items. (Kahil, 1985). If more than one party is involved in an incident, they should deal with every party on equal footing without taking any sides. Likewise, they should not talk on only negative or only positive aspects of a person or group. Rather, they should highlight both aspects. Likewise, if they describe anything, they should discuss both of its benefits and harms. Allah says: "Surely Allah orders you to do justice." (Al-Nahl, 16: 90). Mentioning only negative or only positive sides of a person is considered to be an injustice, which is against the order of Allah in this verse.
- 2.1.3. Freedom of speech in media should not be without any restriction. This freedom should adhere to moral good qualities. The correspondents and other media personnel, therefore, should not utter and write obscene expression, which may provoke obscenity to the readers and listeners. Likewise, they should not try to promote harmful and forbidden things and products. Allah says: "You should not approach the obscene deeds." (Al-An'am, 6: 151). Writing or uttering unethical words is considered to be a kind of obscene actions, which are not allowed according to this verse.

- 2.1.4. Media personnel should avoid speculation because it might lead to tell lies that could be harmful to the parties involved. (Radi, 1997). Allah says: “O you who believe, avoid much of speculation because some speculation is sin.” (Al-Hujurat, 12). Sometimes speculation becomes incorrect, which is a sin. According to this verse, therefore, speculation in reading and writing news features should be avoided.
- 2.1.5. Espionage against Muslims should be abandoned in composing news features. (Radi, 1997). Allah says: “Don’t do espionage.” (Al-Hujurat, 49: 12). The context of this verse, i.e., it has come with other instructions that had been given by Allah to maintain a good relationship among the believers, indicates that espionage is not allowed against Muslims in favor of others whether they are Muslims or not. The same practice also should not be in media because it would harm the public and lead to bad relationships among them.
- 2.1.6. Sudden and instant judgment or development of opinions should be avoided. All information should be properly checked, investigated and confirmed in terms of their accuracy and truthfulness. (Shalabi, 1988; Radi, 1997). Allah says: “O you who believe, if an impious person brings a message, you should critically examine it.” (Al-Hujurat, 6). In media information that comes from members of the public should be verified with other persons and through other means and evidences. It is, therefore, not allowed to broadcast or publish any news without verifying it.
- 2.1.7. All members of media personnel should avoid self contradictory statements, activities and transmission of information. Allah says: “Why do you say what you do not do?” (Al-Saff, 61: 02). In order to be a good model for others, media personnel should perform what they admonish others in their publication or broadcasting of news features.
- 2.1.8. Newsreaders and writers should contribute into guiding the public to the right direction in their political,

economic, cultural and family affairs. Likewise, they should admonish the public for refraining from forbidden things. They also should combine between crime and its appropriate punishment in their news features. In a *hadith* the Prophet says: “Advice should be for the sake of Allah, His Messenger and Book, and also for Muslim leaders and general public.” (Muslim in Al-Nawawi, 1991). This advice includes every aspect of the human life. A member of the media should perform this duty. Allah also orders to enjoin others with good deeds and forbid them from committing bad deeds. He says: “You should enjoin with good deeds and forbid from bad deeds.” (Al ‘Imran, 3: 110). Media personnel should try to follow this instruction of Allah.

- 2.1.9. If any contradiction occurs between public interest and individual interest in dealing with daily events, public interest should be preferred over individual interest. They also should honor the public in preparing news features. (Isma`il, 1994).
- 2.1.10. They should not insult any religion or prophet at the time of writing and reading news because this might lead to chaos and disorder in a society. Allah says: “You should not insult those who call other than Allah.” (Al-An ‘am, 6: 108). In Islam, it is therefore, not allowed to insult other people for maintaining their own belief and practices. However, constructive evaluation is allowed. Media personnel, therefore, should not insult their opponents.

3. Analytical Review Of Selected Features And Advertisements Of “New Straits Times”

- 3.1. This section reviews some selected features on crime of murder and problems related to sex, and some advertisements, which are chosen from seven issues, i.e., from Aug. 6, 2007 to Aug. 12, 2007, of the local daily newspaper “New Straits Times (NST).”
 - 3.1.1. On page 4 of the above news paper dated Aug. 6, 2007,

under the section “Prime News” a news feature entitled “Three security guards held over Utar student’s murder” was published. The story states at the beginning that the Kajang police have arrested three foreigners in connection with the murder of a Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Utar) student Tang Lai Meng in Bandar Mahkota. The correspondents of the story did not mention the names of the above three foreigners. This is a point that should be praised because the crime was not proved. Rather, only on the basis of suspicion, they were arrested. In Islam, a criminal is innocent unless his crime is proved. Therefore, he/she has the right to be not known to the public until his/her crime is proven.

Providing small details of the case, the paper says: “Medical reports have revealed that Tang had been repeatedly sodomized. There was no vaginal penetration as there were traces of semen only in the rectal area.” In another column it says: “On Thursday, Tang’s body clad only in a T-shirt and bra was found in a bedroom by policemen who responded to a call from a neighbor.”

The above statements, however, violate Islamic ethics for media in a number of ways: first, by mentioning words like vaginal penetration in the first statement, and describing her naked body in the second statement, they have failed to protect honor and prestige of a respected female person. Second, this type of wording is considered to be a violation of the respect of the readers, who may have dirty feeling when they will read them. Additionally, this may encourage some people to commit the same type of crime. Fourth, the story has failed to remind the readers about what should be the punishments for the criminals, if the crime is proven, which indirectly may lead some readers to speculate that there is no punishment for it. To the contrary, mentioning of punishments prescribed by the law works as an admonition for others to refrain from committing the same crime.

3.1.2. On page 15 of the same section of “Prime News” of the

above issue of the NST another story of sexual crime entitled “Gang rape: 6 school dropouts remanded” was published. It is praiseworthy that the story avoided mentioning the names of the victim and criminals because mentioning their names goes against their right to protect their prestige. However, the story has violated the Islamic ethics of media in a number of ways: first, it has printed the pictures of all of the criminals although they have tried to cover their faces with their T-shirts, hands and bending to the opposite side of the camera. Showing the pictures of the criminals before proving their crime in the court is against the right of the criminals to protect their prestige, especially while they are teenagers. Second, the story is written in a way that suggests that the crime has already been proved. It says: “They then bundled the 30-year-old woman into lorry and took her to a secluded spot in Tanjung Langsat in Pasir Gudang where they took turns raping her.” The story has not mentioned any witness or other evidences to prove the above claim. Third, the paper has not avoided giving details of the incident. Giving details about sexual crime may lead some people who, following their reading, may be encouraged to commit the same crime in the same way. Fourth, the story has failed to mention the punishment for this type of crime, if it has been proven. Omitting mention of punishment does not serve the purpose of admonishing those who may have intention to commit the same crime but learning its punishment will refrain from doing so.

- 3.1.3. On the page no. 64 of the same issue of this paper under the section of “Life & Times” an article entitled “Elegant, sensual and vibrant” was published on ballroom dancing. In some occasion, such as marriage, Islam allows dancing for small children with proper dressing and without showing private parts of the body and without giving sexy feelings to those who watch them. However, with the above article pictures of two couples have been printed in a way that according to Islamic ethics of media, it is not acceptable. This is because one woman posed in her

picture that shows her private parts and another woman is held by her partner man from the area of her private part under his two legs, which no doubt provoke sexy feeling in the minds of the readers. Additionally, the word “sensual” itself in the title gives sexy feeling to the readers, which is against the Islamic ethics of media.

- 3.1.4. On the page no. 68 under the section “Television & Radio” of the Aug. 7, 2007 issue of the above paper the picture of a model girl has been printed without having any dress on her back, which is not acceptable according to the Islamic ethics of media. This is because this type of picture gives sexy feeling to the readers. Likewise, on the page of 86 of the same issue under the section “Sport” the picture of a female gymnast with her swimsuit has been printed, which is against the Islamic ethics of media.
- 3.1.5. On the first page of the issue of the Aug. 8, 2007 of NST a heading came come up as “Malaysian sex workers going through tough times” with a fake picture of a prostitute. The same topic was discussed on pages no. 12 & 13 under the section of “Prime News” of this issue entitled “The dark side of sex in the city.” The article says that some of these sex girls have been suffering from HIV/AIDS and they are spreading this disease among their customers. Likewise, it discloses the area where these sex workers are available, mentions their charges, and discusses how they do their business. The way that has been used to discuss this issue is not acceptable according to Islamic ethics of media. This is because first of all by mentioning the issue on the first page an improper importance has been given to it, which it does not deserve. Second, no criticism has been written, which gives the readers an impression that this business and having this type of immoral activity are not objectionable. Likewise, it does not provide any suggestion to solve the problem. Moreover, it encourages people to be involved in this immoral activity.
- 3.1.6. On page 36 under the section of “World” of the issue of the Aug. 10, 2007 of NST the almost naked picture of a lady

carried by a man on his shoulder was printed. This is not acceptable according to Islamic ethics of media because it leads the readers to commit the sin of looking at the private parts of a female body. Likewise, it encourages them to have an unlawful sexy feeling, which ultimately causes them to weaken their morality. Likewise, on page no. 16 under the section of "Nation" of the issue of the Aug. 11, 2007 of NST with the title "Circus returns with more stunts" the picture of a female performer was printed with only three pieces on her body. Because of the reasons mentioned earlier this type of picture is not ethically acceptable.

4. Suggestions To Improve The Ethical Condition Of The Contemporary Media

- 4.1. The government should have prescribed guidelines for maintaining moral ethics in media.
- 4.2. An advisory board or committee should monitor regularly that all different types of media practically follow the prescribed ethical guidelines for media.
- 4.3. Because of not implementing the ethical guidelines, if any public or individual harm occurs, the responsible person, or persons should be punished and the victim should be compensated.
- 4.4. If it is not possible to punish the responsible person or company locally for harming others, justice should be made through international courts.

5. Conclusion

Media should follow and implement the ethics mentioned in this paper. Additionally, it should not take the judgment regarding any crime or prospective criminal in its hand before the crime is proved and sentence has been given by the court or judge. Likewise, it should not give broad coverage to criminal cases and crimes related to sex. Moreover, it should

not praise a criminal, should not try to mention excuses of his crimes, and should not try to show a criminal as a hero.

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