Introduction

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.

Western Perspective

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.

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. 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.

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 'inhibitive' to the 'inspirational', etc

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'. 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.

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.'

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. 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.

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.

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 endeavors, 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.

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 Islamic ally 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 has this, but the concept of Tawhid signified 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. 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 super humanized and super defined... 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.

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 realized.

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 mayend 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 bureau 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 cooperation 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 centers 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 keyrole in the formation of an international institute for media training and research for Muslim journalists.