

## Legal Status and Social Impacts of Propagating Fake News: An Appraisal of Qur'anic Teachings and Prophetic Traditions

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### Abstract

With the development of means of communication, world has become global village. Human beings witnessed the knowledge explosion at global level. Information regarding almost every walk and issue of life is now a single click away. The accessibility has potential of both authentic and unauthentic information and knowledge in terms of sources and contents. Youngsters are the asset of every nation. They can be engaged both in positive, productive, and inclusive activities as well as confronted with each other based on negative, unauthentic and exclusivist way of news that eventually leads to social disorder and anarchy. Being a religion of nature, Islam suggest such practical, feasible and rational measures to be easily adopted in routine social life for building and sustaining the relationships based on friendship, fraternity, cooperation, diversity, and inclusivism. The golden principles mentioned in the holy Qur'an and demonstrated in the Prophetic traditions guarantee such a social life in which everyone is engaged in a positive, productive, inclusive, and vibrant relationship and consequently an exemplary human society emerges. The paper is an attempt to explore and highlight the Qur'anic teachings and Prophetic traditions about the need, importance, and value of propagating authentic and reality-based news and knowledge and recommend ways of promoting those Qur'anic teachings and Prophetic traditions to be conveniently applied in contemporary society in Pakistan especially in the circles of youngsters.

**Key Words:** Fake News, Islam, Qur'an, Prophetic Traditions, Youngsters, Pakistan

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## Introduction

Intellect or the faculty of reasoning differentiates human being from other creatures. Since its creation, human being has been evolving with the passage of time. The present-day advancement in almost all walks of life is due to the dynamic, innovative and curious nature of human beings. Besides intellect and reasoning faculty, human beings have been granted the potential to differentiate between right and wrong with respect to morality. As per the Qur'anic teachings, this faculty of discerning vice from virtue was ingrained in human nature at the time of the creation of human soul.<sup>1</sup> The sense of right and wrong helps a human being think positively and act in a right direction by calculating the productivity and consequences of an act. Because the purpose of religion is to maximize the potential of human beings and enable those to move forward and achieve the highest targets of human excellence through the guidance ingrained in human nature and the Chosen representatives.<sup>2</sup>

Islam develops such a living, productive and purposeful approach in a human being that seeks truth, rationality, and facts instead of treading the path of speculations, baseless and superstitious information based on falsehood. A true believer always leads a life based on strong and solid facts and truth instead of speculations.<sup>3</sup> Islam creates such a dynamic and positive approach in a believer that teaches him/her purposefulness and does not shatter it. It gives a positive and constructive direction to his/her thought and potential to be utilized in the wide interest of the society.<sup>4</sup>

“Fake news is as old as the moment when human being learnt misrepresenting his speeches and actions”.<sup>5</sup> *Satan* is considered the first creature who misrepresented facts, misled Adam and Eve and persuaded them to taste the forbidden tree.<sup>6</sup> With the advent of Mass media and communication, besides facilitation and advancement there are potential chances and risks of engaging in both positive and negative activities on the basis of knowledge and information transmitted and reported by the media, both print and electronic media including social media. Besides state-run PTV – Pakistan Television, there are more than one thousand private radio channels and more than one hundred private TV channels. Digital media is no more confined to mere communication functions but, it has been also playing its pivotal role in politics through propaganda and became inherently political governance system.<sup>7</sup> It has been educating people and formulating public opinion in either in favor of or against the government and state. The number of internet users is around 33 million including 8.5 million users of Facebook consisting of 70% male and 30% female.<sup>8</sup> On one hand, civil society organizations use social media for launching campaigns, advocacy for change and empowering the marginalized voices, while on the other hand, some recent incidents of religious persecution and hatred show that

youth can easily be dragged in violent and extremist activities through inflammatory but baseless and fake information. Social media is one of those mediums of information to be held responsible for the social chaos and disorder. It has “become a convenient medium for purveyors of misinformation and fake news, communal and provoking in nature”.<sup>9</sup> Research studies indicate the trend of spreading and propagating fake news can be increased in 2019 as usual.<sup>10</sup> A report states that “personal grudges are presented as religious battles either through ignorance of the facts or malice amid climate of fake news”.<sup>11</sup> Some Clergymen have been playing very negative role by provoking the religious sentiments and sensibilities and inciting masses in such cases.<sup>12</sup> Their role is witnessed in the cases of Aasia Bibi, Rimsha Masih, both were wrongfully victimized by baseless and biased allegations of committing blasphemy. Both were declared as non-guilty by the apex courts later. Another example is Gojra incident in which 40 houses of Christians were burnt claiming lives of eight Christians who were burnt alive, Churches and houses of Christians were set on fire in Faisalabad after alleging a Christian for burning pages of holy Qur’an etc.<sup>13</sup> Similarly a Christian couple was burnt alive in a brick kiln by an outrageous mob after the couple was falsely accused of committing blasphemy in Kot Radha Kishan, southwest of Lahore.<sup>14</sup> Official inquiries show that fake news and rumors led to the violence.<sup>15</sup> The trend of fake news on the basis of religious sentiments is not confined to non-Muslims. Muslims are equally victimized based on fake news. The recent example is Jibrán Nasir, who was harassed during election campaign in July 2018 when he was contesting election. A fake news was surfaced, and he was falsely declared as Ahmedi.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the issue of amending the draft of Khatm-e-Nubuwwat (Finality of the Prophethood) was irresponsibly highlighted by the opposition during last tenure of PML-N government. The PML-N led government was allegedly held responsible for trying to amend the constitutional provisions dealing with the Khatm-e-Nubuwwat. Opposition played very negative role in this regard and used a serious and sensitive issue for political point scoring that resulted in hatred against PML-N leadership and workers. Consequently, shoe was thrown on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while he was addressing a gathering in a Lahore-based religious seminary, ink was thrown on Khwaja Asif, the then federal minister for defense and Ahsan Iqbal, federal minister for planning and development got seriously injured when a fanatic tried to shoot him. All the culprits arrested later claimed their actions as defending the sacredness of the personality of the Messenger (peace be upon him).

Truth leads to peace and promote social integration, human dignity, and productivity.<sup>17</sup> Just like computer viruses endanger the capability of computer hardware and software, similarly fake news is like a deadly and communicable virus that can endanger the social fabric of a peaceful,

productive, and vibrant society. Immorality can only be reformed through an awakened and strong moral sense instead of just bringing more and more technical courses.<sup>18</sup> After the fundamental belief, the most important requirement of religion is morality. It means to reform and cleanse one's attitude towards the Creator and creature in a way to avoid the slightest deviation from moral values.<sup>19</sup> "The Prophetic Mission is to bring humanity to a consciousness of the "ultimacy" of things and to inspire society to organize itself on a morally just basis".<sup>20</sup> The destiny and well-being of a nation rests on the shoulders of young generation of a nation who can change the destiny of their nation because of their capacity and potential of extensive thinking, innovative approach and sustained hard work that eventually leads to progress and development. Those states whose youth are engaged in positive activities are running smooth without any social disorder and tussle. Pakistan has 63% youth population. They can only be engaged in positive, productive activities and nation-building if they are groomed and trained with religious-moral values and appropriate professional education.<sup>21,22</sup> But at present many youths in Pakistan is misled mainly due to false and exaggerated news.

### **Qur'anic Teachings & Prophetic Traditions about Fake News:**

Being the religion of nature, Islam gives very clear teachings and guidelines regarding each, and every aspect of this world related to human being. Qur'an encourages truth and discourages falsehood. It is stated in the Qur'an that.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَقُولُوا قَوْلًا سَدِيدًا

*O believers! Fear Allah and speak (always) truth.*<sup>23</sup>

The principle of speaking truth and words of justice is so important that it must not be ignored even if it is against oneself, parents, and relatives. Its importance can be understood from the fact that only those people will have a pleasant and joyous fate on the Day of Judgement who speak truth in the present life.

قَالَ اللَّهُ هَذَا يَوْمُ يَنْفَعُ الصَّادِقِينَ صِدْقُهُمْ : لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا ۖ

رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ۚ ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

*God will say: "Today, their truthfulness shall benefit all who have been true to their word: theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide beyond the count of time; well-pleased is God with them, and well-pleased are they with Him: this is the triumph supreme."*<sup>24</sup>

It is further highlighted and explained in a Hadith that;

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مَسْعُودٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالصِّدْقِ فَإِنَّ

الصِّدْقَ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْبِرِّ وَإِنَّ الْبِرَّ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ وَمَا يَزَالُ الرَّجُلُ يَصْدُقُ وَيَتَحَرَّى الصِّدْقَ

حَتَّى يُكْتَبَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ صِدْقًا وَإِبْرًاكُمْ وَالْكَذِبَ فَإِنَّ الْكُذِبَ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْفُجُورِ وَإِنَّ الْفُجُورَ  
يَهْدِي إِلَى النَّارِ وَمَا يَزَالُ الرَّجُلُ يَكْذِبُ وَيَتَحَرَّى الْكُذِبَ حَتَّى يُكْتَبَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَذَابًا

*Abdullah Bin Masood (Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: You must be truthful, for truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man will keep speaking the truth and striving to speak the truth until he will be recorded with Allah as a Siddeeq (speaker of the truth). Beware of telling lies, for lying leads to immorality and immorality leads to Hellfire. A man will keep telling lies and striving to tell lies until he is recorded with Allah as a liar.*<sup>25</sup>

The above-mentioned Prophetic tradition indicates the importance and value of truthfulness and its advantages in this life and in the life in Hereafter. Truthfulness leads to all kind of positive and noble deeds. Moreover, it also draws attention of a God-fearing believers about the dire consequences of telling and propagating a lie. Immorality is basically an inclination to all bad deeds that is a deviation from those Divine principles based on which the human nature is created and designed, and the eternal success and failure entirely depends on the purity and impurity of the human nature.

Islamic concept of morality is based on the freedom of choice. It means that everyone is free to choose between right and wrong. One has complete freewill to be selective in the matter of right and wrong without any coercion. Because obeying or practicing right and wrong due to some external force and coercion is against the Divine scheme of test and trial.<sup>26</sup>

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ  
إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ۚ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا هَوَىَٰ أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا ۗ إِن تَلَوُّا أَوْ تَعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ  
اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

*O believers, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So, follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is Ever Acquainted, with what you do.*<sup>27</sup>

Speaking truth and standing with justice is very much important. Islam encourages true believers to be steadfast and persistent in speaking truth even enmity of a nation must not provoke and compel them to abstain from speaking truth.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا ۗ  
ءَاعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

*O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do.*<sup>28</sup>

A true believer is supposed to remain steadfast on truth and justice, speak truth and surrender before truth, do justice and be with justice, and never adopt anything against truth and justice in the matters of belief and deed. Even enmity of a nation must not motivate him to deviate from the path of truth and justice.<sup>29</sup>

عَنْ أَنَسِ بْنِ مَالِكٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَنْ تَرَكَ الْكُذِبَ وَهُوَ بَاطِلٌ بُنِيَ لَهُ فِي رَيْضِ الْجَنَّةِ وَمَنْ تَرَكَ الْمِرَاءَ وَهُوَ مُحَقٌّ بُنِيَ لَهُ فِي وَسْطِهَا وَمَنْ حَسَّنَ خُلُقَهُ بُنِيَ لَهُ فِي أَعْلَاهَا

*Anas Ibne Malik (Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever abandons lies in support of falsehood, then a house will be built for him in the surroundings of Paradise. Whoever abandons arguments even though he is right, then a house will be built for him in its middle. And whoever makes his character excellent, then a house will be built for him in its highest part."*<sup>30</sup>

Qur'an prohibits from following speculations, acting without proper knowledge, excessive conjecture, and inquisitiveness.<sup>31</sup> It states that.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَنْ تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهْلَةٍ فَتُصْحَبُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَادِمِينَ

*Believers! If an evildoer brings you a piece of news, find out its true status, lest you inflict harm on others unwittingly and then regret your action.*<sup>32</sup>

After discovering the path of divine guidance, a believer is endowed with a quite different temperament. He/she stops believing on baseless information and allegations. Instead of commenting on something without proper research and inquiry, he remains silent. This temperament shows that he/she is blessed with the blessing of the Almighty Allah in shape abstaining from irrelevant and superficial talk.<sup>33</sup> Because he/she has a strong and conscious belief in the accountability of the Day of Judgement when everyone will be held accountable for every action and will be awarded or punished accordingly. It is because of this Qur'anic principle that the Muslim jurists and experts tried their best to collect authentic and sound Prophetic traditions and rejected all such narration in which the character and conduct of a narrator was found questionable.

A Prophetic tradition sheds further light on the same issue. It is reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) asked the Companions (Allah be pleased with them) that.

“Shall I tell you who the evil ones are?” They requested him to do so. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: “They are those who spread slander, sow the seeds of dissension among friends, and seek to lay blame upon the innocent”.<sup>34</sup>

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا

*Believers! Avoid being overly speculative, for some speculations are a blatant sin and do not spy on one another.*<sup>35</sup>

The roots of all social evils are unfounded suspicion and baseless estimation based on unfair and biased judgmental approach toward others. When we start believing about a person on mere speculations then our entire approach towards that person turns negative. In such a case we search for his/her drawbacks instead of good deeds.<sup>36</sup> A true and God-fearing believer is expected to avoid such an immoral attitude and instead of propagating false news about a person, he/she is supposed to interact and discuss the matter with the concerned person directly. Such a deed is against the sense of unity and mutual kindness that are basis of an Islamic society.<sup>37</sup>

According to Ali Ibne Abu Talib (Allah be pleased with him) the worst thing one can do is to make a wrongful accusation against an innocent person.<sup>38</sup> Similar directive is explained in a Prophetic tradition reported by Hassan Ibne Ali (Allah be pleased with him) that Messenger of Allah said that.

دَعْمًا يَرِيثُكَ إِلَى مَا لَا يَرِيثُكَ فَإِنَّ الصِّدْقَ طُمَأْنِينَةٌ وَإِنَّ الكَذِبَ رِيبةٌ

*Leave what makes you doubt for that which does not make you doubt, for truthfulness is certainty and tranquility, while lying is doubt and confusion.*<sup>39</sup>

It further states that.

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عِنْدَ مَسْئُولٍ

*Do not follow what you do not know, for the eye and the ear and the heart shall all be held accountable.*<sup>40</sup>

A God-fearing believer who has consciousness of the Day of Judgement that he/she will be called to account before God for his/her deeds, will never say anything before verifying the credibility of the matter. He/she is supposed to use his/her eyes, ears, and brain for the actual purpose for which it is granted to him/her. He/she should also eschew all those thoughts and deeds that are baseless like bearing false witness, making false allegations, condemning someone based on hearsay, justifying falsehood, and abstaining from telling truth merely of account of envy and enmity and placing credence on those things which are beyond the grasp of one's intellect and sense perception because of the natural limitations.<sup>41</sup>

**Conclusion:**

Islam develops such a living, productive and purposeful approach in a human being that seeks truth, rationality, and facts instead of treading the path of speculations, baseless and superstitious information based on falsehood. Fake news is as old as the moment when human being learnt misrepresenting his speeches and actions. Both legally and socially spreading false news is strictly prohibited act in Islam. After the fundamental belief, the most important requirement of Islam is truthfulness and morality. Fake news is like a deadly and communicable virus that can endanger the social fabric of a peaceful, productive, and vibrant society. On the other hand, truth leads to peace and promote social integration, human dignity, and productivity. Those states whose citizens adopted truthfulness in their lives and are engaged in positive activities are running smooth avoiding any social disaster and tussle. But at present a large portion of population in Pakistan is misled mainly due to false and exaggerated news. Being the religion of nature, Islam gives very clear guidelines regarding each, and every aspect of this world related to human being. As concerned the truth and false, Qur'an encourages truth and discourages falsehood. State, media, and academia are supposed and duty-bound to play their respective role in this respect and contribute into establishing an inclusive, peaceful, and vibrant society.

**Recommendations:**

It is recommended that the following stakeholders are responsible for playing their role as mentioned under: -

**1. State:**

- a. It should ensure all means and resources for running awareness campaigns and reformation regarding the need for and importance of truth and facts, and disastrous impacts of falsehood and fake news.
- b. Social media should be regulated as print and electronic media keeping in view the growing negative role of various social media platforms and pages.
- c. Laws should be enacted and executed effectively and indiscriminately. No compromise should be tolerated in this respect.

**2. Media**

- a. It should play its pivotal role as an agent of social change for establishing a durable, positive, and constructive society.
- b. It should report and transmit responsibly and should never compromise on truth and facts. Fake news must be discouraged and there should be no room for propagators of fake news.

- c. Media blackout should be done against extremist and fanatic voices and narratives. Heroism through media should be abandoned.
- d. Media should report and present such news and material that can promote rationality, tolerance, and peace instead of sensationalism and propaganda.

### 3. Academia

- a. Academics are responsible for promoting a strong and living moral sense in the academic institutions.
- b. Teachers of theology should internalize the belief in existence of God and Hereafter in students. Because both can play decisive and effective role in this regard.
- c. Students should be taught the difference between religion and understanding of religion so that they are aware about the status of human understanding of religion that is always open to debate and criticism.
- d. The culture of critical thinking, inquiry and articulation should be promoted in the academic institutions.
- e. Students should be trained and groomed with the characteristics of rationality, tolerance, fraternity, and peace.

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