Islam on Fake News

Introduction - Islam has the answer to all

Islam has the answer. Islam is for yesterday, today and tomorrow. Whenever we come across a news story or development, we should always ask ourselves 'What would Islam have to say on this?'

Khatm Nabuwwa means that Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) is the final Messenger of Allah. What we sometimes forget is that this means he is the final *authority* too. All happiness lies in following him. No one can change that. It also means that answers to all our problems lie with him (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) too. As time goes on, some observers think Islam is ill-equipped to deal with modern issues.
Nothing can be further away from the truth. Fake News, Brexit, Mental Health, Obesity - Islam has the answer to all. If Muslims suffer from insomnia, then Islam has the answer.
If Muslims suffer from work stress, Islam has the answer.

So this programme is in reality a reflection of this maxim; Islam has the answer to it all, including fake news.

The main hindrance to us accepting this is that we think we live in a radically different society to the Prophet's (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) - that life has changed since then, that his model is outdated. The reality is human behaviour has *not* changed.

Despite the changes in cultures and practices, norms and values, human nature has *never* changed. Human behaviour is essentially the same.

*A millennium ago, wars were fought for land, property, power and prestige. The exact same is happening today.
*The downfall of peaceful societies in the past was the collapse of the family. The same is the case today.
*Greed and lust brought down governments in the Greek and Roman times. They bring them down now too.
*The 'Seven Deadly Sins' of wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony originate from biblical sources. When we read the headlines today, has anything changed?
*If the political landscape has changed then why do we teacher Plato and Aristotle in political philosophy today ? We teach it precisely because the way we live has changed, our behaviour essentially hasn't.

What is Fake News?

Fake news is a type of hoax and fraud. It is where people spread false, untrue misinformation in the media with the intention of benefitting politically or financially.

Its types

Fake news can be of two types; one is where the journalist circulates information that he does not realise it is false.

The second is where false information is deliberately circulated, either to promote an often extreme political cause, or to make money from internet traffic. The second type is on the rise and is a serious problem. There are information providers that give the impression they are reliable, but they spread nothing but lies.

Is fake news new? Islamic examples

*The rumour that Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him) had been assassinated during the Treaty of Hudaybiyya was based on fake news.

*Fake news was pivotal in the the events leading up to the unfortunate martyrdom of Sayyiduna Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him).

*The Khawarij were menacing advocates of fake news in the time of Sayyiduna Ali (may Allah be pleased with him).

So fake news is not new. It is simply more widespread today because it has become easier to invent such news. We have new means of misinformation like the internet, Whatsapp, social media and satellite TV channels. All these can be easily distorted and manipulated with ease now. Spreading lies for political and religious reasons has always existed. Today, it has merely become more complicated and more widespread.

What does Islam say? What has Islam practically done to prevent fake news?

Islam always had a system of checks and balances in place. Islam has a brilliant system in place to stop fake news from becoming a problem, in both words and actions. The **words** is the following verse of the Holy Quran (49: 6):

> O believers! If a *fāsiq* brings a report, then examine it, lest you harm some people because of your lack of knowledge and then feel remorse for your actions.'

The **actions** is the discipline of ilm al-hadith. We are not in new territory. The checks and balances in the discipline of ilm al-hadith stopped fake news and people falsely ascribing things to the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) that he did not say. We had to face fake news with fabricated traditions of the Prophet, called *Mawdu'at*. So we already know how to spot the fake from the genuine. We already know who to trust when it comes to information sharing. Essentially the problems are the same, just a new climate.

Therefore the solutions are the same. What does our experience in ilm al-hadith teach us today to tackle fake news?

i. Do not look at what is being said alone, look at *who* is saying it. For instance, does the reporter have vested interest?

Allah says in the Quran:

> O believers! If a *fāsiq* brings a report, then examine it, lest you harm some people because of your lack of knowledge and then feel remorse for your actions.'

The above verse is clear that Allah expects us not to take news from anyone. The news of an open-sinner has to be investigated further.[1]

ii. In the field of ilm al-hadith, countless checks would be made before a hadith would be accepted from a narrator. In short, a person's news would not be accepted until (i) his accuracy was established as a reporter, which we call *Zabt* (ii) his *Adala*, meaning his character. This means he must be a good, sane, religious Muslim that does not commit major sins and controls the minor ones. In the discipline, the scholars agree that an open, propagating *Mubtadi* (innovator) reporter's hadith is not accepted at all. Why? Because he may promote his misguided belief in the hadith. He has vested interest. Hence his hadith is rejected.

Today, in order to know the difference between fake and real news, Muslims need to know the vested interests of media outlets. They all have their own particular political stance and position, which is often reflected in their headlines.

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[1] Hārith ibn Abī Darār (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that this verse was revealed regarding Walīd ibn Uqba, who was sent by the Holy Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) to Banū al-Mustalaq to collect *zakāh*. In the time of Ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) there was animosity between Walīd and the people of Banū al-Mustalaq. When Banū al-Mustalaq heard of the advent of Walīd ibn Uqba, they intended to honour him, in respect of the Holy Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him). The devil tricked Walīd into believing that the tribe intended to kill him. He returned to the Prophet even before reaching the tribe and told the Prophet that they had refused to give *zakāh* and intended to kill him. Upon hearing this, the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) became angry and planned to launch war against them. Banū al-Mustalaq soon heard that Walīd had returned to the Prophet and so their men approached the Prophet directly and said: O Messenger of Allāh! We heard that your representative was coming here and we came out to welcome and respect him, so he could take the right of Allāh from the wealth that He has blessed us with. We then heard that your representative returned without meeting us. We are worried that perhaps you gave him the order to return and that you are for some reason angry with us. We seek refuge with Allāh from your anger and the anger of Allāh.
The Holy Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) was not totally convinced with their account and so he secretly sent Khālid ibn Walīd (may Allah be pleased with him) with a small army to Banū al-Mustalaq. He ordered him to go there undercover and examine the validity of their account. If there were visible signs of their faith in Islām, then Khālid (may Allah be pleased with him) was to take their *zakāh*. If there were no visible signs of their faith, then Khālid was to treat them like disbelievers.
Khālid ibn Walīd (may Allah be pleased with him) reached their land and heard the *adhān* for *maghrib* and *ishā* prayer. He took their *zakāh* and saw nothing there but obedience and righteousness. Khālid (may Allah be pleased with him) returned to the Holy Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) and informed him of what he observed there. At this point, the above verse was revealed: 'O believers! If a *fāsiq* (sinner; in this case Walīd ibn Uqba) brings a report, then examine it, lest you harm some people because of your lack of knowledge and then feel remorse for your actions.'

ii. Credibility is everything

Character and reputation plays a massive part in communication. The Arabs knew the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) simply never lied or cheated people. Credibility is everything. If you are known as a good person, bad doesn't stick on you. If you are known as a bad person, then even the small good is rejected. One way we can build up our credibility is mentioned in the Qur'an, merely being with the truthful helps. Allah says:

يايها الذين امنوا اتقوا الله و كونوا مع الصادقين
O believers! Fear Allah and be with the truthful (9: 119)

iii. Lying has no place in Islam

Lying has no place in Islam. Our religion is based on truth and certainly alone. One of the names of Allah is al-Haqq. Prophet Muhammad (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) is and was known as al-Sadiq. He never lied even once in his life. This goes for before the public announcement of *Nabuwwa* and after. This means in public or private, joking or otherwise. Even his joking was truthful.

Lying certainly has no place in ilm al-hadith. It is the worse sin in the discipline:

*A reporter known or caught lying is rejected outright. If there is a chain in which seven reporters are to be found of outstanding quality but the chain features one reporter merely accused of lying, then the hadith is rejected. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

*In *Sharh Nukhbat al-Fikar*, Ibn Hajar writes that if a person is known for lying in his everyday talk but he is not known to lie in prophetic hadith reporting, then his hadith is still rejected.

*Prophet Muhammad (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) famously warned - in what is considered the most authentic hadith in hadith literature outright - 'Whosoever lies against me then let him prepare his abode in the fire of hell.'
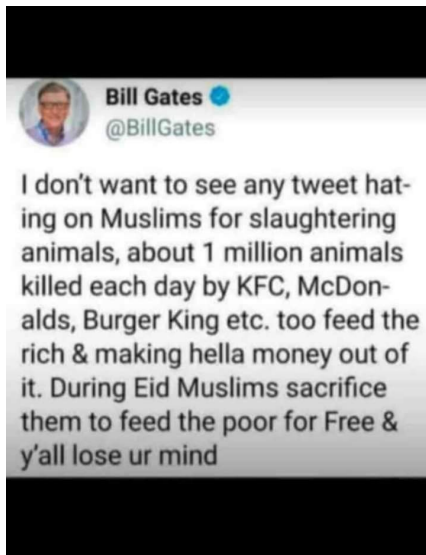
Can we lie *for* Islam?

*In early Islam, a misguided sect called the Karrāmias deemed it permissible to fabricate ahadīth in the areas of preaching only. Their evidence was based upon a narration to be found in some reports of the hadīth 'Whosoever lies against me deliberately…', with the additions 'with the intent of misguiding people'. However, these additional words are not authentic according to the scholars of Hadīth. They justified their actions by saying that they are not lying *against* the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) but *for* him. Such reasoning is in the depths of foolishness, as the religion of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) does not need liars to propagate it.

The scholars of hadīth have unanimously agreed that lying is not permissible in ahadīth. In fact, Abū Muhammad al-Juwainī has gone as far as stating that a deliberate liar in hadīth exits the fold of Islam.

Today, some Muslims think the end justifies the means, that in order to promote and preserve Islam, we can lie and create fake news. This is sheer ignorance. We do not need liars and lies to promote our truthful faith. Unfortunately, many Muslims are happy to share lies in the name of religion:

i. In August 2019, a 'supposed' tweet from Bill Gates was shared by Muslims in which he asked people to consider how many animals are killed daily for the fast food industry, yet people raise objections to the annual Qurbani. It was fake news. Someone else had actually made the comments. But someone decided to falsely ascribed it to Bill Gates, make an image of it, and then distribute the lie to our community.

ii. In November 2017, WhatsApp messages were being sent in English, Urdu and Arabic to the Muslim community, informing us that the Saudi authority had finally acknowledged the Mawlid and so 12th Rabi al-Awwal would be a public holiday in the Kingdom. It was false, fake news.

iii. In November 2016, there was a 'Supermoon' throughout the world. Muslims, it seems, jumped on the bandwagon for spectacular photos and photoshopped the moon into al-Madina al-Munawwara:

v. The issue of moon-sighting is already a deeply, divisive issue in our community. It seems that fake news and fake pictures will not help in the years to come.
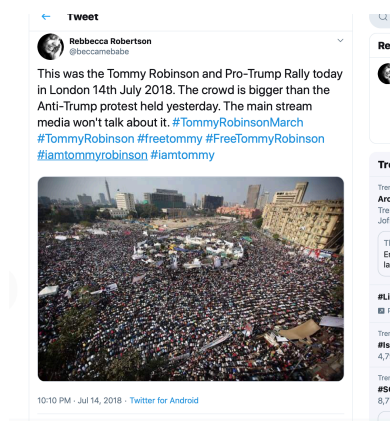
iv. If you do not know the source, it is useless

When you read a saying of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), then most of the time we are focussing on one part, the *matn*. A hadith really is only complete with the *sanad*, which is the chain of transmission. This is basically the source of the hadith. In ilm al-hadith, a hadith without a *sanad* is basically not a hadith. It is incomplete. This teaches us that in Islam, if you have *khabar*, but you do not know its source, then it is not *khabar*. In early Islam, you could never get away with saying 'Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said...'.. You had to start with mentioning the *sanad*, namely the source.

In ilm al-hadith, if a book is found with ahadith in it, it is still usually rejected. Why? Because we do not know who wrote it. Or to word it differently, we know nothing about the author's credibility.
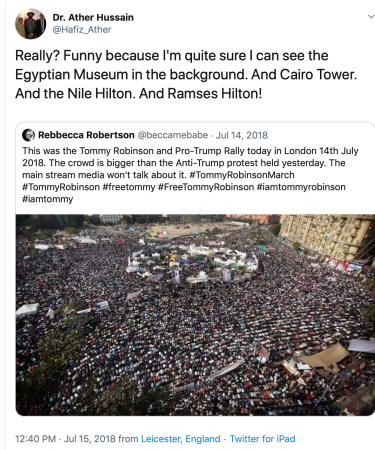
Today
Today, fake news has been allowed to flourish because there is no emphasis on sourcing, referencing and double-checking anymore. We focus on the news, but not where it may have come from, who the source is and so on. Today, the majority of Islamic Whatsapp messages cannot be traced to a source. Therefore it is rejected. Because people readily accept WhatsApp/Social Media messages it has led to so many ills and problems:

On 14th July 2018, a Tommy Robinson March took place in London. His supporters tweeted supposed pictures of the march:

Because everyone accepts news without a second glance, people actually believed this many people came. The picture was not even taken in this country. It was from Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Many observers agree that WhatsApp has been a key factor is growing tensions in the Indian Subcontinent:
*In March 2019, many images and clips were shown in India via WhatsApp supposedly showing the success of Indian air strikes on Pakistani territory. They were fake pictures. They really depicted an earthquake dating back to 2005.

Conclusion

Practical tips to avoid fake news

It is easy to look at this issue of fake news and moan about how evil, ignorant and low the world has become. In Islam, we always start at grassroot. We should be looking at our own behaviour first. For Allah does not change a community till they themselves show signs of change.

So what are we doing to stop it? Here are some practical tips, which in essence, are a reflection of what Allah instructs in the Qur'an, to check news and not to blindly accept:

i. By all means, share news. This is very easy. It just requires a click of the button. But you must check it before sharing. This is harder. Fake news appears on WhatsApp all the time. Misinformation. We believe it. We forward it. Do not forward on chain messages. Check what you are being asked to forward. Prophet Muhammad (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

كفي بالمرء كذبا أن يحدث بكل ما سمع

It is sufficient for a person to become a liar to simply repeat everything that he has heard.

ii. Youngsters are getting their Islam from Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Youtube. Islam says before you accept the news, check their character.

iii. Regarding the information we receive on our websites, the following guidelines can help avoid fake news :

* The website has a poor format and does not look right.
* The image looks unreal and has no details
* The grammar punctuation and spelling is incorrect
* The news is out of date
* You can check if the author has written other articles
* If an article has an unusual url link it usually suggests its fake
* You can use websites like scopes to check if something is actually true

Final point

Khatm Nabuwwa means accepting him (peace & blessings of Allah be upon him) as the final Messenger and as the final authority. Today's problems - like this paper has shown - have yesterday's solutions.

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