

Qur'an and war media: Towards a more constructed approach to conflict reporting

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Abstract:

This study critiques the existing journalistic practices for being deficit in ensuring constructive reporting of wars and conflicts. Though the available academic scholarship developed at the Westernized settings offer a number of alternatives, however due to the peculiar socio-cultural conditions in Pakistan and rest of the Islamic societies, these approaches are not very practical. The authors of the present study propose a more contextual and an Islamic oriented model to facilitate journalists in Pakistan to produce more effective and constructive reporting of conflicts. We believe the model inspired by the Islamic injunctions would only ensure a more professional and practical approach for conflict reporting but it would also facilitate peaceful resolution of conflicts which at present are escalated by the existing practices.

Keywords: Conflict journalism; Western scholarship; Quran; constructive reporting; peaceful resolution

The present-day Pakistan is marred by a number of ethno-religious and political conflicts. Though total deaths and injuries in these conflicts are yet to be determined, only in the war on terror, as many as 80000 people have been killed and many more injured¹. These conflicts have put the whole society in disarray and created numerous problems for the country. However, for the Pakistani media, these conflicts are nothing less than boons. Researchers in the Pakistani context have shown that media are exacerbating these conflicts². This study is an attempt to identify key problems in the existing journalistic practices and propose an alternative peace-oriented model embedded in the teachings of Quran and Sunnah. Though many researchers have developed models for constructive

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reporting of media, the authors of the present study believe the existing scholarship needs a fair amount of fine-tuning to be extended to the Pakistani settings. Moreover, due to social-cultural and ideological differences, the ethos of Westernized journalistic practices cannot be practiced in the peculiar Pakistani milieu. However, both academicians and practitioners have paid little considerations to this issue. We believe many of the issues in the existing journalistic practices in conflict reporting in Pakistan can be addressed if guidance is taken from the Islamic injunctions. This study would be helpful in guiding media practitioners to adopt more constructive approach towards conflicts. Before discussing our proposed amendments, we first discuss the key issues in the existing journalistic practices during wars and conflicts.

Media and Wars:

Conflict journalism is most significant genre of journalistic field. In fact, all the major wars and conflicts in the past two centuries in the Western World have been reported by dedicated war correspondents³. The researchers have been up to the task and a valuable literature is available on the media reportages of conflicts in the works of prominent communication scholars like Daniel Hallin, Gadi Wolfsfeld, Philip Knightley and Johan Galtung to mention just the few. Similarly, in the Asian context, researchers have developed more contextual models to map conflict journalism⁴. All these and others scholars are unanimous in their views that media remain propagandist, sensationalistic and partial during conflicts and throw away the professional considerations of neutrality and objectivity. They criticize the existing conflict journalism practices for compromising journalistic profession and serving the interests of warring parties. Though the critique on journalistic practices is wide, the authors of this study focus on the three most important aspects—patriotism, sensationalism and violence orientation and then propose an alternative strategy grounded in the Islamic injunctions.

Narrow Patriotism:

Many researchers have discussed that Western media promoted narrow patriotism and nationalism during the Two World Wars, throughout the entire cold war era and the subsequent attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan⁵. While governments are always wary about information relating to wars, journalists can exercise freedom if they bond to the professional considerations of objectivity and neutrality. However, one finds many examples where journalists effortlessly surrender their independence and become spokespersons of elites who have vested interests⁶. Even researchers have documented instances where the media incited policymakers to make wars and became harbinger of violence⁷. Researchers have identified different causes for this penchant for violence like interest in drama, novelty and the primacy of national interests etc. Few studies in the Pakistani perspective have also found that media exhibited extreme form of patriotism during wars with India and in the fight against Taliban militia⁸. During the Mumbai attacks, media of Pakistan and India dragged the two countries to the old trap in which extreme form of nationalism and patriotism

prevailed⁹. Majority of the Indian based news media called it “war against India” and lacking any proof they insisted that weapon used in attack was manufactured in Pakistan ordinance factory. Similarly, the Pakistani media, reported that Mumbai attacks were conceded by the Indian intelligence agency. Commencing from the World War 1 to the recent scenario in Syria, the bulk of studies show that media advocate narrow nationalism at the cost of giving objective and impartial reporting of conflicts.

Sensationalism:

The second prevailing characteristic of existing journalistic practices during wars and conflicts is the focus on drama and exaggeration. Researchers traces this problem to the stress on media person to get further ratings for media outlets¹⁰. It is a widespread believes amongst the media marketers that first Gulf combat lifted CNN among the masses and Afghanistan war admired Aljazeera TV. Peoples dependency on media increases during war times and media cash this dependency for commercial benefits¹¹. Few studies in the Pakistani context have found that media sensationalized the ethno-political conflict in Karachi and the political squabbling over the National Reconciliation Ordinance to get more viewers¹².

Violence-oriented:

The third feature of contemporary journalistic practice during conflict times is the predominance of war and violence-oriented stories, like how many people are killed, who is winning etc¹³. Researchers relate this dilemma to a number of issues like the limitations of journalistic profession, organizational and structural constraints and ideological orientations of journalists¹⁴. When media concentrate on the evident effects of violence and neglect the structural and cultural grounds of conflicts, reporting is limited to propaganda and weapons of wars¹⁵.

Of great concern is the issue that how these existing problems can be remedied and the media utilized for peaceful resolution of conflicts. In the Western societies, media is considered as a necessary evil and that it could not be undone from the society. The critical scholars in the West believe the inherent contradictions in the values of freedom, democracy, equality and capitalism make it impossible for media to be sued for corrective purposes¹⁶. The authors of the present study believe these limitations can be easily addressed by taking guidance from the Islamic teachings. Though one can get a great deal of guidance from Islamic teachings relating to the conduct of wars, the authors of this study are selective and would choose only those Quranic verses and Hadith that address the role of communication during conflicts. The significance of this study stems from the fact that most of the conflict are happening in Muslim countries, so it is essential to take guidance from Islamic teachings on constructive reporting of conflicts.

Speak Truth instead of following narrow nationalism:

Islamic teaching spotlight that God has created human being from a solo pair, a male and female, and then divided them into tribes and nations with purpose that

you come to know one another. The most honored among you is the one who is most dutiful and moral. Islam has not given superiority to anyone; in Islamic teaching no one is superior to another. It is clear that Islamic teaching has no worth for unsighted patriotism or nationalism. Islam clearly says that tribes and nations are just for recognition and no tribe or nation is superior to one another. Islam, in this way, does not authorize any plan that counteracts or underrate those bonds, as occur with conflicting nationalisms¹⁷. It is apparent that Islamic teaching has no value for blind patriotism or nationalism. More stress is given to objectivity and truth, and this responsibility becomes more important when it is being discussed under the umbrella of journalism and journalistic values in war zone. In journalism, patriotism means that using specific lens to see the war zone and that lens mean that you are always supporting one specific thought. Patriotism forces the media to hide some key and important information from the audience and do present their message in molded form. In this way media objectivity vanishes and more lies overcome the truth. One of the basic problems with contemporary media is that, in conflict situation media also stands with one group on the name of patriotism and in this way truth disappears¹⁸.

This patriotism is more done on the name of national security and national interest. Any true information from the opposition side is always considered to be the threat to national security. India and Pakistan are the best example to illustrate where Taliban issues and Kashmir problem is always propagated to the masses through the lens of national patriotism¹⁹. Consequently what does this patriotism do it hide some true information and highlight some false or lies news. In every document regarding media ethic it is key that journalist should bring the truth in front but practically this practice is very rare in war or combat zone. Similarly every religion teaching also forces to speak truth and this responsibility becomes more important when it affect the large masses. In Islamic teaching truth is key, and in some teaching Islam called the truth as part of faith. In this regard Quran says: *"And our duty is only to proclaim the clear message"*²⁰

In another verse Qur'an says: *"O you who believe, be careful of (your duty to) Allah and be with the true ones."*²¹

Allah stands with those indicate that Allah like those who speak truth and does not like those who do not speak truth. Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) also emphasized on the importance of the truth by saying

"The person who performs job in a complete, ideal, qualitative and sound way will earn manifold blessings of Allah." (Al-Hadith).

Understanding this equality is central if we are to gain a true understanding of how Islam approaches the issue of nationalism. While distinguishing the strength of national, racial, tribal, ethnic, and cultural disparity, Islam scrutiny them as symbols of God's creative control, not as the source for the establishment of mutually destructive political agenda. Consequently this model demands that always prefer the truth over national patriotism. From the time of world war one to date it is being examined that patriotism and national interest reduce the truth

and real picture of the combat zone. This standing on truth really forbids against propaganda. In one of the sayings, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) said, "*he, who deceive people, is not my follower*" (Al Hadith n.d.).

Deception can be of a variety of forms, including dishonesty in information and knowledge. To formulate it additional undoubtedly, this Hadith is an eye-opener. The Prophet (SAW) says: "*The sign of a hypocrite are three 1. Whenever he speaks he tells a lie. 2. Whenever he promises, He always breaks it. 3. If you trust him, he proves to be dishonest*" (Al Hadith n.d.).

Therefore it might be concluded that any person who is telling lie is not a part of Muslim community. The responsibility becomes heavier when somebody is holding the public office or disseminating the information to a large public. Propaganda, lies or molded truth are never encouraged by the Islamic teaching. As nutshell propaganda is not admirable in Islam on the name of patriotism. Qur'an says: "*Truly Allah guides not one who transgresses and lies!*"²²

*Behold, you received it on your tongues, and said out of your mouths things which you had no knowledge; and you thought it to be a light matter, while it was most serious in the sight of God*²³.

And why did you not, when you heard it, say? "It is not right of us to speak of this: Glory to God, this is a most serious slander!"²⁴

*"O, you who believe, if a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest you harm people unwillingly and afterwards become full of repentance for what you have done"*²⁵.

All these verse of Quran depicts that there is no place for lie in Islam. Truthfulness and reliable is among the supreme qualities any individual can possess on the other hand untruthful direct to corruption and deceit in any society. Truthfulness is one of the most beautiful traits and lying one of the ugliest. Therefore, if deceitful roots from jealousy and or hostility, it is assumed to be one of the most hazardous signal of anger. Being media coverage from the combat or war it becomes more indispensable that combat reporter should only disclose the genuine reality and ought to stay away from incorrect information.

If a conflict reporter or journalist is hiding any truth or annihilating reality on the base of nationalism or patriotism, its results are like the effects of the storm on the leaves of stems.

Sanctity of Human Life:

Many previous studies have found that customary media dramatize war zone or conflict that escort to supplementary acceleration and inflammation. The eventual purpose of the media supposed be to cover the conflict region in such mode that saving life should be the ultimate priority, televise media in particular tend to spotlight on theatrical and aggressive actions. This tendency to center on aggression and conflict and to additional sensationalize brutal events be able to disfigure the public's perception of the situation. This sensationalism may perhaps extra be disparaging in combat or war zone and possibly will put many lives in risk because of the media sensationalism or dramatization. Consequently

as nut shell human life should be given more value and too much care should be carried by media in reporting from the combat zone. One sensational news may cause damage to many lives of human being.

All the international treaties and document give ultimate priority to saving life of human being. Islam also forces the same thing; the ultimate priority is given to saving the life of human being. Quran says:

“If anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.”²⁶

From the above verses of Quran it is clear that life saving should be ultimate cause of human being. Coverage of war from the war zone put lots of the obligation and duties on the shoulder of journalist to guard the life of human being and should throw away the lens of sensationalism. Sanctity of life and how far it is to be protected can never be a domestic legal doctrine as the value of human life is a universal constant. Consequently here the inquiry is how far sanctity of life will become a universal norm and to what extent it is to be protected.

Now a day's war correspondence think that peace is not the news especially from war zone. News from the war zone only becomes news when it has sensationalism. In fact every combat and war zone should be covered in this way by keeping protection of human life at top and every other aspect should be beneath the umbrella of humanity and human life. Journalist most of the time intentionally or unintentionally do highlight the combat zone in such manner just to grab the attention of the audience. Their ultimate objective become sensationalism through which more audience might be attracted but sometime this sensationalism brings more harm to human life in the war zone. Therefore it is highly recommended that ultimate objective of the combat journalism should be to save the human life first, and any reporting should be avoided which might damage the human life.

Violence Oriented Vs Maintenance of Peace

The media can also contribute to reduce the war intensity and bringing the peace in the society. Various people believe that the media reporting of the conflict played a real role in spinning U.S. public opinion against the war in Vietnam. Lack of popular support finally enforced the U.S. to take out from that conflict. Can you imagine interviews with Ho Chi Min in American living- rooms at the height of the Vietnam War? The media can tender better communication with and better information about the opponent. By permitting each side to observe the other fairly directly, by bringing the antagonist into our rooms, the media is able to assist to avoid the demonization of the other side. It is also reality that the steady live reporting in the premature stages of the Yugoslavian conflict assisted to contain that conflict by allowing the parties to openly voice their sentiment and positions. One of the important intentions of media should be, to emphasize those works which facilitate in bringing peace and harmony in the society special in war time. One of the immense media ethics is in its place of focusing on

current information, short announcement from spokesmen and debacle, news information may spin their attention to collective values and historical insight. Emphasize of the Islam is on bringing peace instead of widening the gap between the groups. Harmony is one of the rudiments of Islam.

Whenever the Prophet had an option between two courses of action, he always chose the easier (non-confrontational) one (Al Hadith n.d.). Similarly in the Quran, one of the attributes of God described in the Quran is '*As-Salam*', which means peace and security. That is to say that God's being itself is a manifestation of peace. In another words Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) strengthened the importance of peace in the society in the following words: A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands people are safe. This Hadith should become the ultimate rule for the journalist that whenever journalists have to choose between peace and sensationalism they must strive to guard the peace among the combat groups. This Hadith looks to be more nearer to the contemporary media. Hadith defined that a true Muslim is only one who strive for peace not for combat or sensationalism.

In contemporary world with advancement of technology, written words and spoken sentences have more impact than the weapons. It becomes obvious that it is the duty of the journalist to work for peace in the society and not for destruction and sensationalism. These studies highlighted that the mode in which news media have been highlighting combat and armed conflicts harmfully affects the way in which they could cover peace-building. As Gadi Wolfsfed emphasize that war covering media or journalists cover peace processes, they generally have a non-constructive role. In addition to the political environment, there are media environment variables that help news media contribute to peace. G. Wolfsfed showed that the more sensationalist the media environment, the more likely the news media are to play a destructive role in a peace process. The notion of sensationalism refers to the extent to which journalists feel obliged to use a melodramatic style of presentation in the construction of news stories.

Islamic teaching is totally different what is being a practice today, in Islamic point of view achieving peace and bringing peace in the society should be ultimate purpose of the media. Disagreement and provoking situations is a hard choice while following a peace-making path in dealing with one's opponent is easier. Countering violent behavior with violent behavior is a hard choice, while countering hostility with tolerance and mercy is an easier option. An agitation way of action is harder than making use of quiet strategy. Ultimately all these line provide a base line for journalist that at every cost they are supposed to disseminate peace and avoid sensationalism or promoting of war. Promoting war is easier but promoting peace is real achievement and should be ultimate objective of modern media.

Promoting Peace in Islam is the 'rule', while promoting war is the 'exception'. This is bearing out by all the teachings of Islam and the practical life of the Prophet (P.B.U.H) of Islam.

Discussion:

Conflict or war journalism obliges war reporter and correspondents to intentionally go to the most disorderly part of the earth. At reaching spot, war journalist attempt to get nearer to the combat to create accessible printed balance sheet, picture, or video footage. Conflict or war reporting is also one of the most successful undergrowth of journalism. Reporting war or covering from the conflict zone is not the lone work which conflict journalist must do, but there are definite odd jobs on the shoulder of the combat or war reporter and other gate keeper who are reporting war or conflict. It seems to be obvious that these important task are not being satisfied by these conflict journalists and their gate keeper. Overall conclusion depicts that sensationalism, patriotism, and propaganda are the key point which force the journalist to lean towards one party who are engaged in fighting. The analyses of these points reveal that media sensationalize the combat because media wants to get the rating or to grab the attention of more people. In normal circumstance it looks justified that media sensationalize the news to grab masses but it looks quite strange that media do sensationalize the combat or war zone, where too many lives might be affected by sensational reporting.

Similarly patriotism and national interest is another big cause for biased reporting. One thing needs to be remember that enemy of one group must be a freedom fighter for other. Therefore covering from the combat zone demands that both sides should be presented in equitable. Media by its own self should not portray one party as protagonist and other party as antagonist. It should left to audience to decide who is right and who is wrong, in combat or war zone media should not decide who is right and who is wrong. This patriotism leads the war journalist to go further by involving in propaganda. Consequently truth and lie blur through the lens of propaganda and all this is done on the name of patriotism.

Finally contemporary media coverage from the combat zone is based on violence. News from the war zone is news if it has violence. It looks that media promotes the violence intentionally or unintentionally. Peace should be ultimate objective of media contrary to violence. But promoting peace does not suite the media because media has to attract the audience and audience in present time can only be attracted if there is something different from the routine life. Deviating reporting from the routine reporting put the element of violent content on media.

On the other hand Islamic model of communication do suggest that life, justice, peace and truth are the ultimate objective of the combat journalism. Opposite to sensationalism media emphasize should be on the telling truth and avoiding lie. Sensationalism lead to violence and ultimately it might bring a risk to human life in combat zone. Islamic model contrary to violence ask the journalist to promote and guard the safety of the life of human.

Similarly narrow thinking of patriotism is replaced by the justice. This model suggests that it is not the duty of media to become a party or support a specific

group from the war zone. Media did not need to create hero or villain; Ultimate objective of the media should be to present the real picture with justice and equity.

Ideal journalism is difficult work at the best of times. In war time or in combat zone war journalist are vulnerable by aggressive clash, reporters face much greater obscurity. War journalist work in an environment of fright and fear and with divergent sides try to have power over the media. But covering a war or combat is also when high-quality journalism is mainly vital. In combat zone, the function of the reporting is decisive in providing the masses with complete, trustworthy and impartial picture. The technique and process of war or combat sensitive reporting permit the media to supply the community with more complete, impartial and correct information on the combat or war.

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