

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ISLAMIC PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of a Muslim in the Islamic society; how the Muslim can use modern communication systems such as social media to communicate effectively in such a way that Islam could be propagated. The paper examines positive and negative influences of the social media and how a Muslim can use the media in accordance with Islamic provisions.

Key words: Islam, Muslims, Media, Social Media, Positive and Negative Impact

1. INTRODUCTION

“Everything in life is communication” (Minjibir, 2008) and the society people live today is very large and complex that made the use of modern communication system inevitable. Also, with the advent of media technologies such as social media, the meaning of communication has been reshaped. These media bring with them new opportunities for individuals and news organizations to participate in unique storytelling experiences and audience engagement. “The interactive nature of the media has challenged the society, individuals, and news organizations to rethink the traditional roles and practices of information dissemination” (Chunks, 2008). The media has virtually changed the life of mankind.

Facebook, Twitter, You Tube to mention a few are today known as the social media/networking sites because they invariably support the spread of information in the least controlled manner. In most cases, the new media serve to promote the *Reithian* traditional role of radio, television, newspaper, magazine, etc., as expressed by David Sarnoff (in BBC, 2016) which is to inform, educate, and entertain the people by providing them with the right information and education on critical and trivial matters within and outside their environments.

Islam teaches that God is the Creator, the Sovereign, and exalts man (a Muslim) to the noble and dignified position of being God’s trustee on earth (Qur’an 38:26). Man’s life is endowed with a lofty purpose to establish an order where in equity, justice, peace and prosperity reign supreme. ‘Islam establishes a balance between individualism (a Muslim) and collectivism (society). Islam believes in the individual personality of man and holds everyone personally accountable to God. It guarantees the fundamental rights of the individual and does not tolerate tampering with them. Islam makes proper development of the personality of man one of the prime objectives of its educational policy. However, it does not subscribe to the fact that man must lose his individuality in society or in the state. The collectivism therefore, becomes a society of individuals capable of and willing to fulfill the purpose of humankind as God’s trustee (Ahmad & Barzinji, in Damri, 2012; Musah, 2015). Social media have become potent means of influencing the thoughts and perceptions of individuals in the society.

2. WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Kaplan and Haelein (2009) submit that social media is a “group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. The media are characterized by interactivity and accessibility of information as well as scalable communication techniques that substantially changed the way traditional media organizations, communities and individuals communicate. Social media is the collection of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Websites and applications dedicated to forums, micro blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social *curation*, and wikis are among the different types of social media (Rouse, 2012).

In line with this, social media are basically classified into the following divisions according to Wigmore (2016):

- *Collaborative projects* like Wikipedia which is a free, open content online encyclopedia created through the collaborative effort of a community of users known as *wikipedians*. Anyone registered on the site can create an article for publication; registration is not required to edit articles. Wikipedia was founded in January 2001.
- *Blogs and micro-blogs* such as Twitter which is a free micro blogging service that allows registered members to broadcast short posts called tweets. Twitter members can broadcast tweets and follow other users' tweets by using multiple platforms and devices.

- *Content communities* such as “YouTube which allows registered members to enjoy videos and music or sound they want, upload original content and share it all with friends, family and associates in general.
- *Social networking sites* such as “face book” which is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues.
- *LinkedIn* is a social networking site designed specifically for the business community. The goal of the site is to allow registered members to establish and document networks of people they know and trust professionally.
- *Google's social networking project*, designed to replicate the way people interact offline more closely than is the case in other social networking services. The project's slogan is “Real-life sharing rethought for the web.”
- *Reddit* is a social news website and forum where stories are socially created and promoted by site members. The site is composed of hundreds of sub-communities, known as "subreddits." Each subreddit has a specific topic such as Islam, technology, politics or music. Reddit site members, also known as, "redditors," submit content which is then voted upon by other members. The goal is to send well-regarded stories to the top of the site's main thread page.
- *Pinterest* is a social curation website for sharing and categorizing images found online. Pinterest requires brief descriptions but the main focus of the site is visual. Clicking on an image will take you to the original source.”So, if you click on a picture of a copy of Qur’an, you will be taken to a site where you can purchase it.

Technologies use include blogs, picture sharing, wall postings, emails, instant messaging, Qur’an and songs sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social media/network aggregation platforms. Therefore, social media is becoming an integral part of life online as social websites and applications proliferate. Most traditional online media include social components, such as comment fields for users. In Islam, social media are used to preach and teach Qur’an, promote Sunnah, and connect to current and existing believers and foster general Islamic provisions.

3. IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ISLAMIC AND MUSLIMS

Scholars, professionals and Islamic research institutions as Wigmore and Islamic Creed (2016) categorized how social media influenced Islam and those who practice the religion in the following ways:

3.1 Positive Impact of Social Media on Islam and Muslims

Increases Learning Opportunities

Uthman bin Affan reported that The Prophet (SAW) said, "The most superior among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it."

(*Bukhari, Hadith 5028*)

This hadith shows far more than the importance of learning Qur’an because in it (Quran) much knowledge is driven. Before the advent of social media, seeking knowledge about Qur’an and other Islamic literatures was mainly restricted to the mosques, educational institutions, and learning from imams and sheikhs (non formal education). These traditional learning opportunities remain intact. However, social media made Muslims to rethink the traditional approaches and now the Muslims are able to learn, question, teach, and network through social networking sites.

There are more than enough avenues by which Muslims can learn about Qur’an and other Islamic literature. The Internet and ICT in general have given the public access to all kinds of information and made Islamic literature so much more accessible. Also, on YouTube, for example, a Muslim can listen to a lecture in any language of his choice, whenever he wants. Blogging sites such as *MuslimMatters.org* and *SuhaibWebb.com* have become significantly popular with both Muslims and non-Muslims as a way to gain information and learn about Islam.

Social media provide opportunity for Muslims to connect with imams and sheiks, political leaders, and scholars, for online courses in Qur’an, Tajweed and so on. Muslims can now learn the language of the Quran as well as its recitation in their various homes. Islamic into websites provide question and answer opportunities which are closely regulated by certified clerics and Ulama of the religion.

Propagation of Islam Made Easy Social media are today, the most powerful tools to spread the word with least cost and least efforts. They are now a common opinion across the globe that has changed lives. In the early Islamic era, when the Islamic society was simple, not large and complex, the Sahabah and other Muslims rode horses and use of other traditional and primitive transportation means

to travel to different geographical locations in order to call people to Islam, the religion was propagated through da'wah in gatherings or during discussions with individuals. These local means of communication though not as viable and fast assisted successfully in the spread of Islam through the special grace of Allah.

The Prophet SAW said:

"If Allah guides a person through you, it is better for you than all that is on the earth." (Bukhari and Muslim) And in another tradition The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

"God, His Angels and all those in Heavens and on Earth, even Ants in their Hills and Fish in the Water, call down blessings on those who instruct others in beneficial knowledge." -Al-Tirmidhi.

Today, Muslims have an advanced media instruments that can enable them achieve so much more that is better than all that is on this earth before Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala. Simple messages on Islamic propagation can be viewed, listened on audio and visual and be read by billions of Muslims around the world through the use of social media platforms. This is because the media in this regards provide Muslims with the opportunity to enlighten more individuals about Islam within a concise period of time.

Wider and Improved Coverage of Islam It is no longer news that social media have played a crucial role in the way Muslims and Islam have been perceived over the years. Suzy Isma'il (cited in Salman, 2011) commented that "it would be hard for anyone to say that they have not 'heard' of Islam with the amount of coverage that the religion has received in recent years through so many different social media platforms. However, he argues that because of media filters and biased reporting or media coverage, it is impossible to control the presentation of Islam to those who may not be familiar with its concepts and tenets. He further says that since 9/11 "Islam and Muslims have been both vilified and simultaneously victimized.

There seems to be two extreme reactions to Islam itself. One is sincere curiosity and interest that motivates education and the other is blind hatred and misunderstanding that leads to scapegoating and stereotyping.

Being constantly in the media has been both a blessing and curse for Muslims and Islam. Due to the spike in media's coverage of Islam in recent years it has "definitely increased general awareness of peoples' faith," said ICNA IT Department Content Manager, Rida Bint Fozi. "The portrayal varies across news outlets, but it is great that Islam remains a hot topic in the media and people are curious and ask questions. It gives us the opportunity to answer them" (Salman, 2011).

4. NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ISLAM & MUSLIMS

Promotion of Indecency: Islam values decency most, also, it propagates the emulation of agreed and certain manners with a view to better the life of Muslims in general, one of such manners is lowering of the gaze as stated in the Holy Qur'an: Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala said: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do" [Surah An Noor 24:30].

Modesty applies to all Muslims (men and women). A brash brazen stare by a man at a woman or even at a man (in case of gay) is a breach of modesty. Social Media have today abridged this commendable virtue in the name of freedom of expression. The expression of almost naked pictures of both men and women on social media such as Facebook, Blackberry Messenger, Twitter as well as all other electronic communication channels has made it almost impossible for the Muslim community that utilizes such tools to uphold such a noble command from the Almighty Allah. This is ultimately because it is not easy refusing to enlarge the display picture of that "Aura" exposed girls or guy on a social network profile.

Unguarded Utterances To the extreme level, freedom of expression means forums that promote obscenity, sensuality, and lust. Islam indicates that freedom of expression with regard to obscenity must be regulated in the interest of both public decency and of protecting vulnerable Muslims in the society from provocative expressions that appeal to base and ignoble passions. Groundless allegations without any justification, slander and libel are all forbidden. If freedom of expression is used to instigate harmful sedition and incitement to mutiny, violate the freedom of Islam, distort interpretations, or indulge in obscenity or corruption, then it is prohibited in Islam, asserted Kamali (in Barzinji, 1998).

Abu Hurairah reported that the messenger of Allah SAW said: "...He who believes in Allah and the last day, let him speak well or should remain silent" Bukhari and Muslim, The Prophet has commanded "good" in the speech (written, pictorial and animated material included) of man, this is to promote good qualities in individuals and promote peaceful coexistence beyond the right to utter anything people like in the name of "freedom of speech and expression" which only ends in sowing seed of discourse among people.

Social media today have made the process of information selection known to be “gate keeping” impossible. This is because formal controls such as laws, court’s decision that refine the laws and rule and regulations administered by government agencies are not applicable to social media practices. These controls are administered to ensure defense, public safety, public order, public morality and public health. Also, the controls stand to protect individual’s reputation and organizations and religion (Islam) and belief of members of society.

Updates of un-godly statements are the trends of the day on our social media. The spread of illicit pictures and lyrics of Western songs has done no good but succeeded in tending to deprave the minds of the Muslim ummah in debauch of good virtue sand comportment as stated in the quoted hadith above.

Inaccurate Portrayal of Islam and Muslims Accuracy means stating information the way it has been. Social media are the most powerful tools to spread the information with least cost and least efforts. Social media have changed lives, sometimes, destroyed them as well. Cases on personal and public levels become common, where some people took advantage of some one's information to create a living hell for that person. Women for instance, are tricked relatively easily and so they are used and misused until nothing is left for them. In many Muslim societies, such cases show up girls and boys either commit suicide or are murdered. Hence, just like every other thing, social media too has its dark side. This also, creates misconceptions about Islam and the portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence, today the western media model has provided a room for the so called “freedom of speech and expression”, also, social media provided “citizens reporting” where every trained and untrained, Muslims and non- muslims can participate in posting information without control.

Social media users used this opportunity to directly or indirectly launch a campaign against Islam in the name of a campaign against terrorism by referring to the Muslims as “terrorists”, “extremists”, “radical Islamists, fundamentalists”. These are all misconceptions about Islam that are due to the social media’s prejudice and ignorance mostly because not enough knowledge is always sought in Islam

Abu Darda’i reported that the prophet SAW said: “Nothing will be heavier on the scale of the believers on the day of resurrection than good manners; Allah hates one who utters foul or coarse language” At-Tirmidhi In another tradition, Abdullah Bin Umar reported that the Prophet SAW said: “The best of companions to Allah is one who is best to his companions and the best of neighbors to Allah is the one who is the best of them to his neighbors: *At-Tirmidhi*

4.1 Proper Usage of Social Media in Islam

Keeping Good Friends, It is of paramount importance to have good friends in accordance with the provisions of Islam. Muslims always associate with other people for a long period of time, after some times the quality of that people that the Muslims are with would be reflected in them. The Muslims begin to talk or act like them so if their actions and lives values are not in conformity with that of Islam, the Muslims begin to lose their faith gradually by being with the people. It is therefore imperative that Muslims should regulate the communication they make with people through the social media to that which will benefit Islam positively.

Modern media and communication technologies such as social media today enables Muslims and even non-Muslims to bridge communication boundaries by staying in a virtual company of people from all over the world. The media also, provide opportunity for e-presence; this is similar to a gathering of people around one another with the absence of physical presence. Muslims therefore, stand to benefit as much in a social/virtual gathering as they would in a physical one. And this is of course with reference to available contacts on Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry, YAHOO, Google+, etc.

Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala says: “And keep yourself patient [by being] with those who call upon their Lord in the morning and the evening, seeking His countenance. And let not your eyes pass beyond them, desiring adornments of the worldly life, and do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desire and whose affair is ever [in] neglect.” [Al-Isra’i 18:28]. Prophet Muhammad, SAW said: “The example of a good companion and a bad companion is like that of the seller of musk, and the one who blows the blacksmith’s bellows. So as for the seller of musk then either he will grant you some, or you buy some from him, or at least you enjoy a pleasant smell from him. As for the one who blows the blacksmith’s bellows then either he will burn your clothes or you will get an offensive smell from him.” Bukhari and Muslim. And In another Tradition, the Prophet Muhammad SAW said: “Mix with the noble people, you become one of them; and keep away from evil people to protect you from their evils.” Bukhari and Muslim

Observation of Islamic Limitations: In using social media platforms of any kind, a Muslim should ensure that he limits himself to the quest for useful knowledge in Islam always. The Prophet SAW said, “He who sets foot on a path in the quest of knowledge, Allah facilitates for him the path to

Paradise. Tirmidhi. It is therefore essential for Muslims that if they must indulge in the use of the social media they should then do so in such a manner that it will be beneficial to Islam with respect to the acquisition of rightful knowledge and May Allah guide us to paradise through such venture.

Children Exposure to Social Media, Muslims live in such an environment highly dominated and influenced by non-Islamic values, traditions and behaviors. Muslims as parents, guardians, friends and neighbours in the society should understand that Islam makes it clear that children are a blessing, a trust, and a test from Allah.

Allah says, “And know that your possessions and your children are but a trial and surely with Allah is the mighty reward” (Suratul Anfal: 28). This reminds Muslims of a binding responsibility to ensure that they instill the path of guidance on those they are responsible for, be it their friends, brothers and sisters as well as their children. Muslims can always endeavor to educate the children on the most effective ways to utilize the social media tools they find at their disposal.

5. CONCLUSION

It could be said that, social media if properly utilized would attempt to be kind, humane, munificent and benevolent institutions. The media would have a significant concern, care and love for Muslims they serve and seek to inspire, of course, without such a goal, the media become self-serving and in many cases ill-serving institutions. This is because, Barzinji (1998) says, self-serving media eventually come to justify such questionable approaches as spying, yellow and sensational reporting and muckraking, all of which, society’s eyes erode their trustworthiness. It is equally important to take into consideration while utilizing social media such concepts as: other’s point of view, human weakness, and the right to privacy, lives, careers and aspirations which if care is not taken are likely to suffer in the hand ‘citizen journalists’.

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