

## **Some Principles of Information Ethics from the Koran**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed at extracting some main principles of information ethics directly or indirectly explained in the Koran and interpreting them in the context of our information society. For extracting the Koranic principles of information ethics, the exegesis of the Koran (tafsīr) approach was used. A relatively comprehensive and public Koran exegesis in Persian, entitled Tafsīr Nūr authored by Muhsin Qarā‘ī was referred to. Findings showed that the Koran considers some ethical principle directly or indirectly applied to information search, use, dissemination and evaluation and ones giving, transforming, receiving, searching and using information, applicable to our information society worldwide. Deeply investigating and carefully applying these main principles of information ethics can be beneficial to all information-related sections.

**Keywords:** Information Ethics, Ethical Principles, Koran, Islamic Perspective

### **Introduction**

We live in the complex age of information. Considering the vast development in information technology and the emergence of new information acquisition and dissemination modes and approaches, information ethics and its application to our information society and for any information provider and/or user have been highlighted as a way to fair present, distribute and use information. As an information sender, receiver, searcher and/or user, we face ever-increasing challenges when dealing with information and information resources. Easy access to information and the existence of more convenient ways to distributing information necessitate considering global and common principles of information ethics derived from various cultural and religious sources throughout the world. Information ethics is a wide confluence of the ethical concerns of media, journalism, library and information science, computer ethics, management information systems, business and the internet (Froehlich, 2004). Similar to any other ethical principles, those of information ethics have some cultural and religious dimensions well worth noting worldwide.

In spite of its importance and valuable implications, information ethics from the Islamic perspective has not been deeply considered in related literature, especially in English (Abdallah, 2007). The Koran, the holy book of Islam religion, as a main source of Islamic sharia has some fundamental principles for information ethics. We can use these principles for information collection, search, evaluation, distribution and use. The principles can be applied by both information sender and information receiver or user. This research aimed at extracting

some Koranic direct and indirect implications for information ethics.

### About the koran and Its ethical aspects

As the miracle of the last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh), the Koran is the last revealed words of Allah. It was gradually revealed by the Angel of Revelation, named Gabriel over 23 years of the lifetime of the Prophet who was 40 years old when the first verse was revealed in Makka city. The Koran suras (chapters) were revealed in Makka and Madina cities under different states and conditions for explaining the Sharia of Islam in theory and practice. The Koran acts as the primary source of every Muslim's faith and practice in their daily lives. It deals with all the subjects affecting human beings' life, including among others wisdom, doctrine, worship, trade, law, communication and "ethics" (Ma'rifat, 2009).

According to Rahim (2013), there are some elements in the Koran which can be considered as fundamental principles of ethics, such as the nature of right and wrong, divine justice and power, and freedom and responsibility. The Koran provides beneficial guidelines and teachings for a just and balanced society and proper human conduct and behaviour. In addition, belief (*īmān*) is a fundamental aspect of morality in the Koran. The ethical-legal concepts and exhortations dealing with righteous conduct are linked to a profound awareness of God, thereby emphasizing the importance of faith, accountability and good ethics. Believers should do what is right and avoid what is wrong in all aspects of their lives, especially when interacting one another. Some verses in different suras (chapters) highlight the importance of ethics and obeying ethical principles before the Koran:

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakāt and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those -Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is exalted in Might and Wise (9: 71)

This verse and other related verses in different suras highlight the importance of ethics and obeying ethical principles before the Koran.

### Method

For extracting the Koranic principles of information ethics, we followed the methodology involved in exegesis of the Koran (*tafsīr*), especially that of scientific *tafsīr* (Rezaie, 2004). (Islamic Awareness Website has provided beneficial information on the principles of *tafsīr* for English readers Retrieved from: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Tafseer/Ulum/>). An updated 10-volumed Koranic exegesis written by an Iranian researcher and exegete, Muhsin Qarā'ī, entitled *Tafsīr-e Nūr* was used for interpreting the verses. As one of the main Shia's current Koranic commentaries in Persian and easy-to-understand text for all, this exegesis used other Koranic exegeses and explained Koran verses as some main hints and points under each verse. This makes concept of the verses easy to explore and understand. After deep reading of each verse and its related points and hints, ones directly or indirectly related to information ethics were extracted, categorized and explained. The categorization of related verses was based on human information behaviour aspects, including information search, evaluation and use (Wilson, 2000). A specialist team consisting of five experts in Islam religion, and library and information science has been consulted continuously for controlling

the correctness and appropriateness of extracted concepts and themes. The related verses were categorized and further explained under each extracted theme and concept. *The Noble Quran* was used for English translation accessed via its website “quran.com” in May 2016.

### Findings

We found 13 main principles related to information ethics in the Koran. These principles were directly or indirectly embedded in 46 verses. Table 1 shows these main extracted principles and their main "information behaviour" categories and listed the related suras and verses.

Table 1

*Koranic principles of information ethics, their categories and related suras / verses*

No	Koranic principle of information ethics	Category*	Sura: verse
1	Avoiding absolute trust in information and reliance on conjecture	Information evaluation	2: 8-20; 10: 36; 18: 22
2	Exploring information from different aspects	Information search	2: 30; 9: 61; 27: 27; 39: 18; 49: 6
3	Avoiding the distribution of and belief in false and biased information	Information use	2: 78-79
4	Using formal and selected words and concise expression for information delivery	Information use	2: 104; 25: 33; 27: 30-31; 29: 46
5	Arguing against and being aware of misleading information	Information evaluation	2: 258; 3: 118; 17: 36; 24: 15
6	Referring to knowledgeable ones before disclosing information and when in doubt	Information search	4: 83; 5: 102; 9: 16; 10: 104
7	Needing the information provider to be expertise as well as benevolence	Information search	7: 62
8	Explaining information in detail	Information evaluation	10: 5
9	Trusting authoritative information sources	Information search	12: 46
10	Classifying information	Information evaluation	12: 69
11	Emphasizing information providers' serious responsibilities	Information search	13: 37
12	Being aware of misguided information as the restriction on freedom of information	Information evaluation	26: 224-7
13	Respecting the means of information transmission by delivering useful information	Information use	68: 1

\* Some principles may be categorized in more than one category. We included each principle only in its main broader category.

### Discussion

In this section, some main principles of information ethics from Koranic perspective that were mentioned in the above have been explained in detail.

### 1. Avoiding absolute trust in information and reliance on conjecture

In the sura of *al-Baqara*, verses 8-20 (13 verses in total), the conduct of hypocrites (*munafiqūn*) has been described. The content of the verses 13 and 14 is notable:

And when it is said to them, "Believe as the people have believed," they say, "Should we believe as the foolish have believed?" Unquestionably, it is they who are the foolish, but they know [it] not (2: 13). And when they meet those who believe, they say, "We believe"; but when they are alone with their evil ones, they say, "Indeed, we are with you; we were only mockers" (2: 14).

The words and acts of hypocrites before believers where they pretend to become a believer and their hidden relations with evil ones and non-believers indirectly imply that trust in information from different unknown and inauthentic information sources is not rational. This is very important in our age of different media delivering some selective, biased and false information, especially in cultural, social and economic contexts.

The Koran lamented individuals' obeying unreal opinions. Thus the reason for their being misled and misguided is that they follow their own conjectures and their own corrupt speculations. The Truth, what is of real value is knowledge. Sound conjecture and confidence, if based on proper solid grounds is valuable:

And most of them follow not except conjecture. Indeed, conjecture avails not against the truth at all. Indeed, Allah is well-aware of what they do (10: 36).

Besides, based on the Koran, some people subjectively argued about "the Sleepers of the Cave". As the Koran said, these arguments and opinions would not be true:

They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog - guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], "My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone." (18: 22).

Again, this verse confirms that obeying conjectural information is not the case and valuable. As a result, one should search the true information presented in several reliable sources.

### 2. Exploring information from different aspects

When God wanted to create Adam<sub>(pbuh)</sub> and appoint him as His successive authority (*khalifa*), angels began to ask Him about the aim of such creation and explain their reasons for their unwillingness as they were able to propose his conflicts based on divine news, their own experiences of pre-Adam humans' features and so on. God answered their questions:

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know" (2: 30).

The necessity for questioning and answering, as well as presenting documented information was repeatedly mentioned in several verses of the Koran. This reveals that an information user has right to and should ask about information presented them from different

aspects and the information provider should clearly explain these aspects.

For another example, some of the hypocrites said that the Prophet was a simple and whimsical person, and he listen to and accepts whatever everybody says. Then, the Messenger of Allah became inconvenient of them. At that time, this verse was revealed and answered them:

And among them are those who abuse the Prophet and say, "He is an ear." Say, "[It is] an ear of goodness for you that believes in Allah and believes the believers and [is] a mercy to those who believe among you." And those who abuse the Messenger of Allah -for them is a painful punishment (9: 61).

Being an ear (a careful listen to all words of information providers) is of ethical principles. Therefore, one should consider all possible information sources and investigate into all aspects of information presented in order to better decision-making.

In this regard, investigating into information presented is one of usual ways all divine prophets considered. Narrating the story of the Prophet Solomon<sub>(pbuh)</sub> and the queen of Shaba, the Koran said that when the Hoopoe claimed that he brought true and certain news about the queen, Solomon emphasized the need of investigation into his report:

[Solomon] said, "We will investigated into whether you were truthful or were of the liars (27: 27).

In addition, one should consider information from different perspective and select the best, as the Koran implied this, when describing the features of God's servants:

[God's servants are] who listen to speech and follow the best of it. Those are the ones Allah has guided, and those are people of understanding (39: 18).

As well, the believer is one who investigates deeply into news, especially one comes from unauthorized one:

O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient and spiteful one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful (49: 6).

It can be concluded that investigating into suspect information and non-authoritative information source is necessary for an information seeker.

### *3. Avoiding the distribution of and belief in false and biased information*

The crafty scholars, among the Jews, kept the knowledge of the scriptures exclusively to themselves and told only lies in front of the illiterates in order to exert and maintain power over those of them who did not know the books. It is a warning to mankind in general that the illiterate is the innocent victim of priest-class falsehood and tyranny, as God says:

And among them are unlettered ones who do not know the Scripture except in wishful thinking, but they are only assuming (2: 78).

In order to confuse the people so that they could not see in the Holy Prophet the qualities mentioned in their books and rightly identify him as the promised prophet, these scholars had made alterations and manipulations in the Holy Scriptures. God warns them against their acts:

So woe to those who write the "scripture" with their own hands, then say, "This is from Allah," in order to exchange it for a small price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they earn (2: 79).

These two subsequent verses imply that acting based on assumptions is not justifiable and one should act based on true and documented information. In addition, biased and manipulated information may be distributed by some irresponsible scholars. Therefore, misinformation lurks in every format and may not be real and reliable. One should be aware of this information when searching and using information.

#### 4. *Using formal and selected words and concise expression for information delivery*

Some Muslims wanted the Prophet to talk to them with deliberation. They were using the word *Rā'inā* for this purpose. The doubters, and all those with the outlook of Banī Īsrā'īl, take to twisting any word necessary to suit their purpose. *Rā'inā* means "listen to us", but it was turned by a little twist in accent into a word of reproach (meaning "stupid") by the enemy. Therefore, the word *unẓurnā* (look upon us) was suggested which gave no room to the enemy for casting aspersion on the Holy Prophet. It prohibits use of any word bearing sinister meaning with reference to him:

O you who have believed, say not [to Allah's Messenger] "Ra'inā", but say, "Unẓurnā" and listen. And for the disbelievers is a painful punishment (2: 104).

Based on the verse, using formal and polite language in oral and written communications for sending and receiving information is considered by the Koran as a main ethical principle. One should use polite, clear and non-vague language for communication.

In several verses, the importance and necessity of politely presenting information have been highlighted. For example, Allah ordered the Prophet to respond to disbelievers and his opponents with "the best explanation" and good words and "with words of peace":

And they do not come to you with an argument except that We bring you the truth and the best explanation (25: 33).

And the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth easily, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they say [words of] peace (25: 63).

In addition, being concise in presenting information is a good way for being accurate and time-saving in giving information. When the prophet Solomon wrote a letter for the queen of Shaba for guiding her, he wrote a concise and accurate letter dedicated to his actual goal, as the queen said:

Indeed, it is from Solomon, and indeed, it reads: 'In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful, Be not haughty with me but come to me in submission [as Muslims]'" (27: 30-31).

The Koran recommended the best way for those who deal with giving and sending information. One should give their information in "the best way" appropriate for the audience. For example:

And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him" (29: 46).

#### 5. *Arguing against and being aware of misleading information*

The king Nimrud, in the days of prophet Ibrahim<sub>(pbuh)</sub>, claimed divinity. Boastful of his

temporal power, he disputed with Ibrahim about the authority of the prophethood bestowed upon him by Allah, since Ibrahim's authority clashed with his absolute sway over the people, whose lives, he argued, depended on his decision: he could kill them at any time or let them live. Ibrahim rendered his argument null and void by pointing out his helplessness against the divine forces working in nature. Although there was no reply, yet Nimrud, an obstinate disbeliever, could not draw advantage from this clear guidance:

Have you not considered the one who argued with Abraham about his Lord [merely] because Allah had given him kingship? When Abraham said, "My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death," he said, "I give life and cause death." Abraham said, "Indeed, Allah brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west." So the disbeliever was overwhelmed [by astonishment], and Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people (2: 258).

As a result, sophistry and fallacy are effective means of distributing misinformation by hostile ones. They tend to persuade others by giving misinformation in the name of real and correct information. A committed information specialist should make strategies against such information that mislead the community.

It is needed to be aware of disinformation, too. The hostile ones intend to disrupt peoples' thoughts and decisions by any possible means, including among others, their words, as the Koran says:

O you who have believed, do not take as intimates those other than yourselves, for they will not spare you [any] ruin. They wish you would have hardship. Hatred has already appeared from their mouths (words) and what their breasts conceal is greater. We have certainly made clear to you the signs, if you will use reason (3: 118).

In one hand, as information consumers, we should not pursue what is unknown. We must only hear the things for which there are good and strong reasons to believe them:

And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart -about all those [one] will be questioned (17: 36).

In the other hand, as information providers, we should not deliver information that has no knowledge on without any investigation:

When you received it with your tongues and said with your mouths that of which you had no knowledge and thought it was insignificant while it was, in the sight of Allah, tremendous (24: 15).

#### *6. Referring to knowledgeable ones before disclosing information and when in doubt*

Allah invites people to refer to the Prophet and knowledgeable individuals to solve their affairs and problems because they know the truth and are authorized to guide; if they do not, surely they will go astray in the direction of Satan:

And when there comes to them (information about [public] security or fear, they spread it around. But if they had referred it back to the Messenger or to those of authority among them, then the ones who [can] draw correct conclusions from it would have known about it. And if not for the favor of Allah upon you and His mercy, you would have followed Satan, except for a few (4: 83).

Based on the verse, disclosing secret and main information, especially information that relates to social context needs to consult knowledgeable ones. In addition, it is necessary to

not distribute confidential and classified information. In some suras, the consequences of disclosing some information have been mentioned.

O you who have believed, do not ask about things which, if they are shown to you, will distress you. But if you ask about them while the Qur'an is being revealed, they will be shown to you. Allah has pardoned that which is past; and Allah is Forgiving and Forbearing (5: 101). A people asked such [questions] before you; then they became thereby disbeliever (5: 102).

It can be concluded that sometimes, it is needed not to search and question about some information that disperses people's thoughts as well as not disclosing such information. It is best to deliver valuable information for the public. The enemy may abuse some confidential information, as Allah orders the believers to not take other than Allah, His Messenger and the believers as intimates:

Do you think that you will be left [as you are] while Allah has not yet made evident those among you who strive [for His cause] and do not take other than Allah, His Messenger and the believers as intimates? And Allah is Acquainted with what you do (9: 16).

When in doubt, referring to experts is one way to seek and find appropriate information, as the Koran said about itself that people refer to those who have been reading the Scripture (People of the Book) in order to be certain about its revelation:

So if you are in doubt, [O Muhammad], about that which We have revealed to you, then ask those who have been reading the Scripture before you. The truth has certainly come to you from your Lord, so never be among the doubters (10: 104).

#### *7. Needing the information provider to be expertise as well as benevolence*

All prophets whom Allah sent for guiding people were knowledgeable in publicizing His messages (*tablīq*) and benevolence to them. For example, the prophet Noah<sub>(pbuh)</sub> said to his people that he conveys the messages and advises them benevolently:

I convey to you the messages of my Lord and advise you; and I know from Allah what you do not know (7: 62).

Therefore, a committed information expert should give information to the users for helping and guiding them. For an information provider, the expertise will not be enough and it will necessitate some commitment and benevolence.

#### *8. Explaining information in detail*

In many verses of the Koran, detailed explanation of signs, realities, phenomena and so forth is highlighted. In the following verse, for example, focusing on the natural phenomena, Allah has emphasized the importance of explaining detailed information:

It is He who made the sun a shining light and the moon a derived light and determined for it phases -that you may know the number of years and account [of time]. Allah has not created this except in truth. He details the signs for a people who know (10: 5).

As a general principle, it can be said that avoiding generalization and vagueness in presenting serious and strategic information of all kinds and its detailed explanation is recommended for better clarification of information and its uses.

### 9. *Trusting authoritative information sources*

In narrating the story of the prophet Joseph<sub>(pbuh)</sub>, the Koran said that the king sent a man to prison where Joseph was sent to ask Joseph about interpretation of the king's dream. One reason was that Joseph was truthful (*ṣeddīq*). The man said:

"Joseph, O man of truth, explain to us about seven fat cows eaten by seven [that were] lean, and seven green spikes [of grain] and others [that were] dry - that I may return to the people; perhaps they will know [about you]." (12: 46).

It can be concluded that one should search for information from trusted and reliable sources. This is more important in our age of information in which vast variety of correct and false information from authoritative as well as dishonest resources is crated increasingly and surrounds us in all work and life places.

### 10. *Classifying information*

In narrating the story of the prophet Joseph, the Koran said that his half-brothers didn't know him after years and he didn't introduced himself to them, except his small brother:

And when they entered upon Joseph, he took his brother to himself; he said, "Indeed, I am your brother, so do not despair over what they used to do [to me]" (12: 69).

As Joseph introduced himself only to his brother in that certain time, it can be concluded that information should be classified and some information conveyed to the public at certain appropriate time. Some information needs to be kept secret or delivered to some certain ones for the certain duration. In addition, it is not rational to convey some information whenever.

### 11. *Emphasizing information providers' serious responsibilities*

The Koran emphasized in some verses that all prophets had serious responsibility in publicizing the divine commands. The Prophet Mohammad was one of them to whom "come of knowledge":

And thus We have revealed it as an Arabic legislation. And if you should follow their inclinations after what has come to you of knowledge, you would not have against Allah any ally or any protector (13: 37).

Knowledge owners have responsibility before societies and individuals. Human information providers should be aware of their responsibilities in information provision for society. They should attempt to deliver trusted and accurate information.

### 12. *Being aware of misguided information as the restriction on freedom of information*

Many opponents of the Prophet were using the poet as a means of persuasion, misleading and argumentation, especially against the Koran. If the poets or any other human information sources are insincere and divorced from actual life, its goodness and serious purpose and they become instruments of evil, they seek the dark depths of wickedness rather than the heights of enlightenment. The poets saying or writing such poets were in the wrong way:

And the poets - [only] the deviators follow them. Do you not see that in every valley they roam? And that they say what they do not do? Except those [poets] who believe and do righteous deeds and remember Allah often and defend [the Muslims] after they were wronged. And those who have wronged are going to know to what [kind of] return they will

be returned (26: 224-7).

It can be concluded that presenting information in every format and content for misleading people is wrong and the true information and its distribution are valuable. From Koranic perspective, distributing misleading information is a restriction that one can attribute to the freedom of information expression and distribution.

### *13. Respecting the means of information transmission by delivering useful information*

In confirming the truthfulness of the Prophet, Allah swore the pen and writing:  
Nūn. By the pen and what they inscribe (68: 1).

According to some commentators, it would be an appropriate link with pen, mentioned in this verse, if *nūn* is taken as ink or ink-holder. They imply knowledge, information and learning. The wisdom of countless men from the beginning of civilization is available today and will be there in every age in future in the form of written words. It is a continuous source of knowledge importance of which might have been referred to here. This is a sign of importance of information resources and content. Therefore, an information specialist should respect them by transmitting useful information via them.

### **Conclusion**

It is well known that information and communication technologies have permeated all aspects of the world we live in. As information-related technologies are developing and as the world of information users is changing, there is a need to look further at intercultural information ethics that the cultures and religions have for this complicated world. A good strategy is needed to construct an information society that is ethically sound (Floridi, 2002). Some resources of worldwide religions and cultures can be beneficial to this aim.

Islamic resources, including the Koran has many ethical orders worth nothing in founding rich information codes of ethics. However, few researches have conducted on information ethics from an Islamic perspective and by using Islamic religious resources. For example, Abdallah (2007) investigated the information ethics from an Islamic perspective using a software piracy case. In another research, Abdallah (2010) introduced the Islamic legal system of sharia laws and ethics and its process of resolving ethical quandaries as applied in the field of information ethics. As a main knowledge resource of Islamic laws and Islamic life style, the Koran has a few implications for information ethics some were explained here. The Koran has discussed on issues related to human information behaviour, including among others information acquisition, search, exploration, delivery, evaluation and use. As an information provider and/or user, one can benefit these ethical principles throughout the world of information age. These can be used as a framework for describing a global information ethics -or setting "intercultural information ethics" in the words by Capurro (2009) in our information-embedded age. This calls for further and detailed research, too.

The Koran has a deep inside that everyone can navigate it as they can. We extracted the principles of information ethics in the extent to which was possible for us. Other interesting researchers should step forward for more navigation in this deep sea and extracting new related principles as well as analyzing our findings in a deep manner.

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