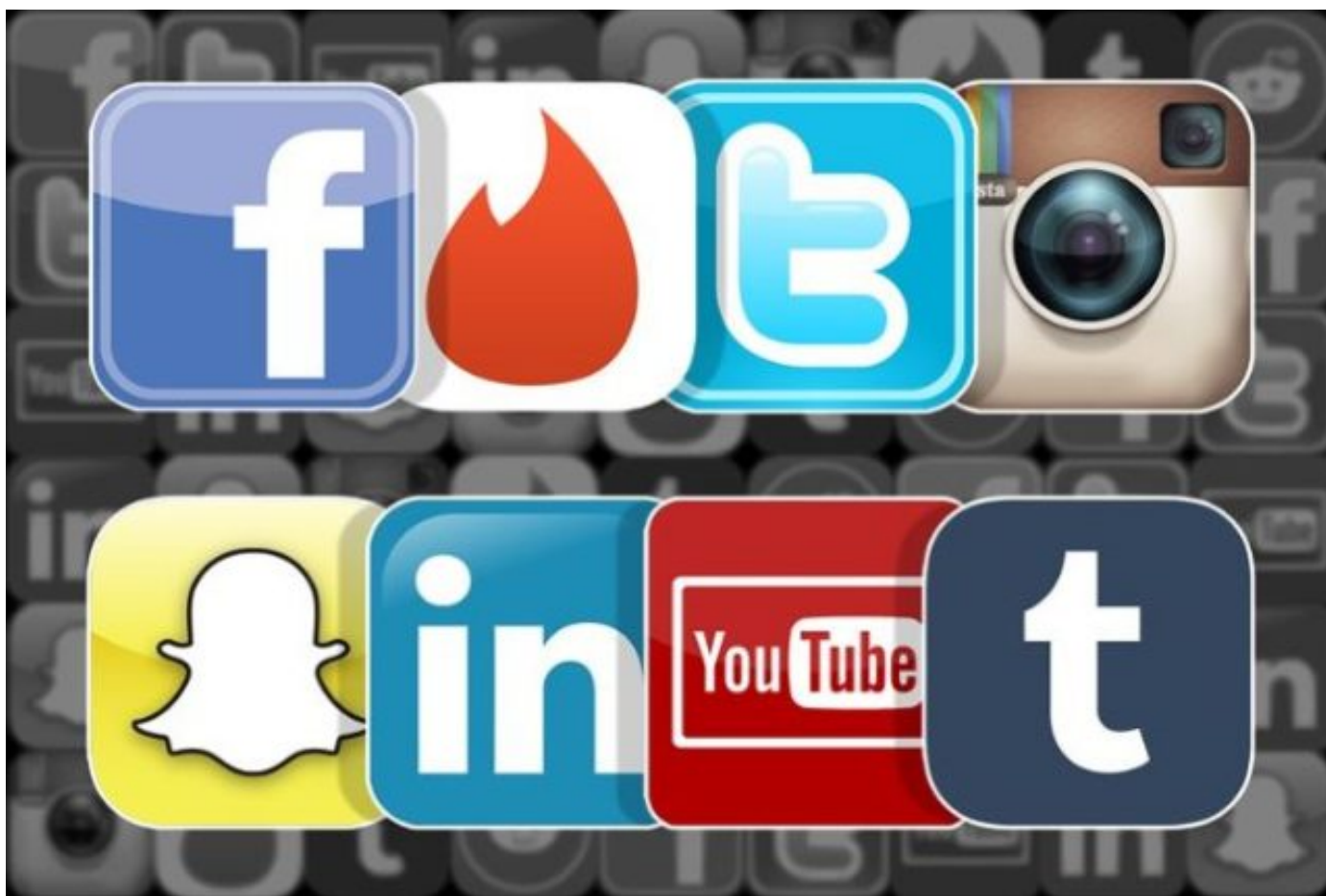# Upholding Islamic Ethics On Social Media During COVID-19 Pandemic

The commandment for tabayyun on COVID-19-related information is crucial in order to make sure that we receive and share authentic news or information.

By **Dr. Nur Suriya binti Mohd Nor** - May 11, 2020

The Malaysian Reserve reported that as the period of Movement Control Order (MCO) during COVID 19 pandemic is extended in Malaysia, the use of internet in several sectors, such as entertainment, education and shopping has multiplied. There has been a rapid growth in home-based entertainment, video conferencing and online communication. Besides using social media for official purposes (e.g. attending online meetings, online business), Malaysians also use social media to kill their pass time during MCO. Many people use social media, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, to share methods of

cooking [i] and other personal activities. While the internet use has brought in benefits to many, there are also cases when its use has resulted in the opposite. There are people who misuse social media to spread fake news, including about COVID-19. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported that they have received 43 reports from members of the public regarding fake news on Covid-19 on social media, with 18 suspects identified. [ii]

As Muslims, there are certain Islamic ethics that we should observe when using social media, especially during difficult time, such as during COVID 19 pandemic. This is evident when Allah mentions in Surah al-Ḥujurāt verse 6 "O you who believe! If a rebellious evil person comes to you with a news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful to what you have done."

In this verse, Allah mentions about an Islamic ethic which is *Tabayyun* or the effort to validate or cross-check the truth of an information. It can be done by checking the reliability of the sources, or investigating the extent of authenticity of the information. The Arabic word *Tabayyun* has been defined by scholars, such as Mufti Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri (2019) as "verification or validation of the truthfulness of something." It is imperative upon a Muslim who receives any news or information to analyse and verify the truthfulness and accuracy of the information in order to avoid being involved in any negative conducts, such as fitnah (slander), dishonesty and humiliation of others due to jealousy or hatred among people in the community. Indeed, the directive for *tabayyun* is essential in order for us to avoid relying on baseless information which may lead to any preconception and prejudice, [iii] to the detriment of social harmony.

According to Tafsir Ibn Kathir, in Surah al-Ḥujurāt verse 6, Allah has made it mandatory to investigate the news which are brought by sinners and the wicked; and to make sure of its authenticity. Otherwise, if the sinner's word is taken for granted, the decision which is made based on it will be of a flawed one. Stated another way, a decision should be made only after an information that serves as basis to decision making be perused of its authenticity. In relation to this, a jurist (*mufti*) who has the authority to issue a *fatwa*[iv] is responsible to make sure that the *fatwa* that he issues is made based on authentic sources. If the information is not authentic, and in turn the *fatwa* is weak, he is liable for any sin committed by the public who follow his interpretation. Though considered authoritative, *fatwas* are generally not treated as binding judgments; hence a requester who finds a *fatwa* to be unconvincing is permitted to seek another opinion. Indeed, Allah forbade taking the path of the corrupted and sinners. This is why groups of the scholars of Hadith refuse to accept

narrations from narrators whose characteristics of reliability is unknown, for they might be from among the wicked people. [v] This is in line with one of the *fiqh* principles which is 'Assumption is not considered when the fault is certain.'[vi]

The commandment for *tabayyun* on COVID-19-related information is crucial in order to make sure that we receive and share authentic news or information. The MCMC warns the public to not share any fake news on COVID-19 which may cause unnecessary negative impacts, such as panic, anxiety, and depression in the community. The Malaysian Law, under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998, has stipulated that any sharing of offensive and menacing content is an offence which carries a maximum fine of RM50,000 or a jail term not exceeding one year or both. [vii] Hence, as a good citizen, we have to be more responsible in sharing or commenting on any piece of information, or materials posted on social media (video footage, photograph) or even social media text. Sharing or commenting on unverified content will not only cause public confusion at personal level but can lead to unnecessary societal unrest in the community.

There are many websites that we can visit in order to verify the authenticity of the news on COVID 19. We can visit the official website of the Ministry of Health Malaysia[viii] or World Health Organization[ix] to get the accurate information or news on COVID-19. Other than these websites, the public may also visit a dedicated portal which is Sebenarnya.my. [x] The portal has been established by the MCMC to counter misinformation and shoot down fake news circulating on social media. Thus, it is necessary that *tabayyun* or verification of news and information on COVID-19 be observed by all social media users during the MCO period.

Other than *tabayyun*, social media users can also apply another Islamic ethic which aims to avoid negative assumption or suspicion, hence staying true to the command from Allah mentioned in Surah al-Ḥujurāt, verse 12 which read "O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion; indeed some suspicion is sin. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it. And have *taqwā* of Allah. Verily, Allah is the One Who forgives and accepts repentance, Most Merciful." [xi] According to Tafsir Ibn Kathir, the verse mentions that Allah "forbids His faithful servants from being suspicious, which includes having doubts and suspicions about the conduct of one's family, relatives and other people in general. Muslims are to avoid suspicion without foundation." In this verse, Allah forbids Muslims from having suspicions about one another and He also warns His servants not to spy and backbite one another, both would bring about various detrimental effects to people in the society.

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him (PBUH) also mentioned about suspicion in one hadith narrated by Bukhari, Muslim and Abu Dawud. He said: "Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the worst of false tales; do not spy on one another; do not look for other's faults; do not be jealous of one another; do not envy one another; do not hate one another; and do not desert (shun) one another. And O Allah's servants! Be brothers!" [xii] In this hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reminded all Muslims to avoid themselves from doing bad things such as spying on one another (تَجَسَّسُوا), looking for other's faults (تَحَسَّسُوا), being jealous of one another (تَنَافَسُوا), envying (تَحَاسَدُوا), hating (تَبَاغَضُوا), and shunning (تَدَابَرُوا) one another. According to Al-Awza`i (707-774) "تَجَسَّسُوا or *Tajassus* means, to search for something; تَحَسَّسُوا or *Tahassus* means, listening to people when they are talking without their permission, or eavesdropping at their doors; and تَدَابَرُوا or *Tadabur* refers to shunning each other." [xiii]

In Surah al-Ḥujurāt, verse 12, Allah mentions about the conduct of backbiting; which He prohibits for it is equivalent to the conduct of eating the flesh of a dead human being: "Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother You would hate it. Just as you hate eating the flesh of a dead person, on account of your nature; so hate backbiting, on account of your religion. The latter carries a punishment that is worse than the former."

In relation to the use of social media, the Verse 12 clearly appears to discourage people from having suspicion, spying, and backbiting one another. As a social media user, we should not have any suspicion or negative assumption on others. We too must not share any postings that we receive from other users. For example, when someone posted something related to his private life, his job, his social responsibility or food that he cooked, we should not simply judge him to be a narcissistic person or a person who likes to show off in order to attract others' attention. Maybe, he did it with the intention to fill his time or to inspire or motivate other people. We must not use social media to spy on others with the intention to find their weaknesses or faults. We should refrain ourselves from using social media as a platform to backbite or say something bad about others. Social media should be treated as a platform for spreading good information instead of bad or unverified news. As the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "Verily actions are by intention, and for every person is what he intended." As a social media user, we should use our social media platforms for good purposes and with the right intention. We must observe the ethics, uphold good values of social interaction, and spread the love.

Endnote

[i] *Nur Haziqah A. Malek, "Malaysians Turn to Social Media, Streaming Services to Fill Time During MCO," The Malaysian Reserve, April 6, 2020. Retrieved April 20th, 2020. https://themalaysianreserve.com/2020/04/06/malaysians-turn-to-social-media-streaming-services-to-fill-time-during-mco/*

[ii] *"COVID 19 Fake News: MCMC, Police Investigating Five Individuals," Bernama, March 23rd, 2020. Retrieved 21st April, 2020, mcmc.gov.my*

[iii] *Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, Bayan Linnas Series 184: The Concept of Verification (Tabayyun) in Receiving and Conveying News, June 13, 2019. Retrieved April 20th, 2020, https://muftiwp.gov.my/en/artikel/bayan-linnas/3485-bayan-linnas-series-184-the-concept-of-tabayyun*

[iv] *A formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic Law given by a qualified legal scholar (Mufti). Fatwas are usually issued in response to questions from individuals or Islamic courts*

[v]*Tafsir Ibn Kathir, http://www.recitequran.com/en/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/49:6*

[vi] "لا عبرة بالظن البين خطؤه"

[vii] *"Content Sharing on Social Media is a Shared Responsibility" Official Portal of the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, July 20, 2019. Retrieved April 20th, 2020. https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/media/press-releases/content-sharing-on-social-media-is-a-shared-respon*

[viii] *http://www.moh.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/2019-ncov-wuhan*

[ix]*https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019*

[x] *https://sebenarnya.my.salur/*

[xi]*Tafsir Ibn Kathir, http://www.recitequran.com/en/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/49:12*

[xii] *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*

[xiii] *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*

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