

Sorting through information

Tawatur in non-hadith applications

The easy access and mass proliferation of information has left the world in an unprecedented position. Sorting through the plethora of information and competing sources can be at times confusing, especially when it comes to an immediate large-scale problem such as the current Coronavirus outbreak.

Who do we trust? How can we make an informed decision? Do we have to experience something directly in order to confirm it to be true? When is it appropriate for us to rely on information presented by other people?

Muslims have a guiding principle when it comes to high-impact information. Allah, تعالى, says in the Quran:

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَنْ تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهَالَةٍ فَتُصْحَبُوا عَلَيْهِ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَدِمِينَ)) – سورة الحجرات 6

O believers, if a person, breaking from convention, brings you news, verify it so you do not harm people unknowingly, to then become regretful for what you have done – Al Quran 49:6

We learn to have a healthy, balanced level of skepticism towards unverified information, especially if it is of high impact, meaning the information has the potential to have heavy consequences. We also learn to be receptive to good information, even when it comes from the enemy.

Shortly prior to the battle of Badr, Ali, Al Zubair and Sa'd were sent to gather information on the enemy. They found and captured two personnel belonging to the enemy army and brought them to the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, but they found the prophet was praying. So the three companions decided to question their captives, asking if they belonged to Abu Sufyan's caravan. The captives replied that they belonged to the army of Quraish. The companions did not believe them and hit them. The servants then confirmed that they belong to Abu Sufyan's caravan. The prophet upon completing his prayer said to the companions: when they were truthful you hit them, and when they lied you let them be. By Allah they were truthful. They belong to the army of Quraish.

The Muslim who is connected to his or her faith is a truth-seeker, a person who takes guidance from the saying of the Khalifa Umar bin Al Khattab:

لست بالخب، ولا الخب يخدعني

"I am not a deceiver, and the deceiver will not trick me."

It is true that we live in a time where neither the truth, nor the trustworthy are easily discernable. In this article I will attempt to give a breakdown on how we treat information that reaches us, and a suggested framework for how we treat today's high-impact information.

Before I begin, I want to remind the reader that we employ a level of trust (in varying degrees)

to information we receive all the time. Realistically, we are rarely consistent in our allocation of trust across all information mediums. We are often influenced by biases not directly related to the validity of the information.

Being aware of the biases in our decision-making is an important step towards improving the way we interpret information. In his book “Thinking, Fast and Slow”, Daniel Kahneman talks about heuristics that are employed by the human mind to quickly resolve a question. I will give a few examples of heuristics below¹:

The availability heuristic: you are likely to draw a conclusion on a matter based on the ease at which relevant examples come to mind. If an issue comes to mind quickly and easily, we are likely to give a higher importance to it.

The Attribute Substitution heuristic: people have a tendency to substitute complex problems for problems that are easier to solve. An easy example is if a friend asks you what the quickest route is from your home to the nearest shopping center, you are more likely to provide an answer to the question based on the route you prefer, as it is much easier for your brain to determine.

The Affect heuristic: The tendency for our emotions to affect our decisions, such as whether or not we like the messenger or the information that is given.

In determining what value to give to information, we need to consider the validity of the information as well as the credibility of the messenger.

For witness testimony, the faith sets the important stipulation that the witness is *‘adl* (upstanding) and *thiqah* (trustworthy). For the conveyer of information to be considered of the former, there would be no credible record of any major sin or glaring contravention of convention attributed to this person. The number of messengers (witnesses) is also at times considered.

We have in our faith stipulations for various kinds of information that reaches us. Minimum witness requirements range between 1 and 4 for matters such as the sighting of the new moon, the loaning of money, a marriage, and the occurrence of a crime.

When it comes to determining the authenticity of religious scripture, the higher the number of witnesses the better. For a hadith the number of narrators has a direct impact on the level of authenticity of the hadith. For some hadith, the number of narrators along its chain will have reached the level of tawatur. For Quranic verses, Tawatur was a stipulation for each and every verse.

What is Mutawatir?

¹ You can also check the following link for further information on heuristics: [21 Heuristics you need to know – Life Lessons](#)

The common Muhaddith definition of the word Mutawatir is:

ما رواه جمع عن جمع بحيث يبلغون حدا تحيل العادة تواطؤهم على الكذب أو صدوره منهم (من أول السند إلى آخره)، بشرط أن يكون مستند انتهائهم الحس: الرؤية أو السمع

What has been narrated by a group from a group to the degree that they reach numbers that would under normal circumstances be impossible for them to have collaborated to lie upon a matter (from the start of the chain of narrators to the end). This is only considered relating information received through the sensory means of seeing or hearing.

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Can we apply the rules for *tawaatur* to today's high impact information?

This concept has been used predominantly for establishing further credibility to *ahadith* which meet the criteria. It basically means that if the scholars studying the *hadith* chain notice that the number of narrators along the chain has reached a number where it is not fathomable that they would all agree to fabricate the *hadith* then it is considered *mutawatir*. This is in addition to the pre-existing judgement on its authenticity. The scholars add the requirement that the beginning of the chain (the original narrators) must have experienced the matter firsthand.

Can we apply the rules for *tawaatur* to today's high impact information?

Given that the matter of *tawaatur* is considered for verifying information rather than determining a Fiqh ruling, I would say that it is a useful mechanism for considering today's high-impact information. The example I want to offer is the presence of the Coronavirus, as a virus unlike the flu in severity and transmissibility. This information is being related by large numbers of people with relevant expertise who are "on the ground", dealing with patients either in hospital or in the community. These people with relevant expertise are known to many of us, and if we don't know them personally, we will know people who do know them.

This article is not discussing whether or not the government approach has been justified. It is also not discussing any matter relating to the vaccine. It is merely suggesting that sufficient numbers of the people on the ground are informing us of the significance of the virus for us to accept that those effects have been serious for some people and can potentially be serious for us.

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