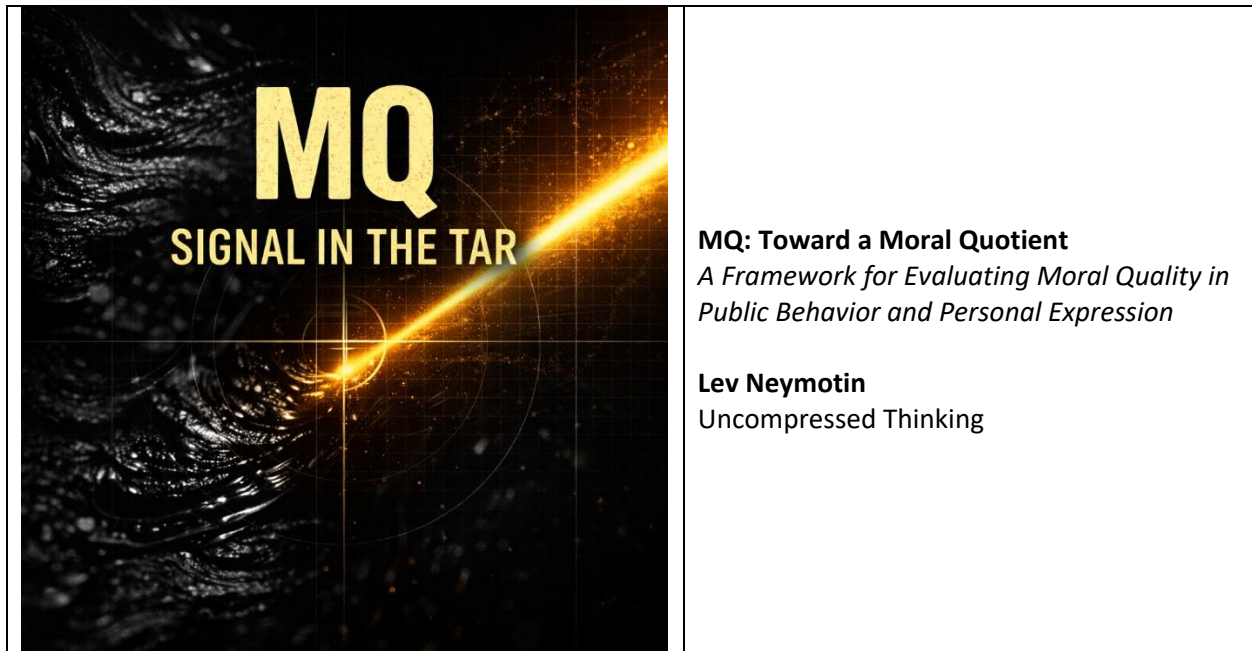




What was once a barrel of honey with a trace of tar has become a barrel of tar with a trace of honey—and the honey is drowned in it.

Abstract

This paper proposes a new social concept: **MQ, or Moral Quotient**. MQ is not intended as a measure of inner worth, private virtue, or ultimate goodness. It is not a score of the soul. It is a proposed evaluative framework for observable public behavior in the media sphere: expressed positions, patterns of interaction, methods of disagreement, treatment of truth, tolerance of deceit, and the recurrent moral posture a person adopts when speaking before others.

The proposal begins with a historical intuition. Earlier mass media were far from pure, but they operated through visible filters: editorial judgment, reputational boundaries, institutional gatekeeping, and durable labels attached to sources. The result was imperfect, often biased, sometimes manipulative, yet still bounded by structure. The social order could tolerate a trace of tar in a barrel of honey. Today, in much of web-based social media, the proportions often feel reversed. Amplification mechanisms reward speed, outrage, emotional contagion, and repetition, while truth, decency, proportion, and self-restraint struggle to compete in an environment engineered for friction and engagement.

MQ is offered here as a response to that inversion. Its purpose is not censorship, punishment, or state control. It is not a proposal for compulsory ranking of citizens. Rather, it is an attempt to articulate a transparent moral lens by which visible public behavior may be assessed in a disciplined way. In that sense, MQ is closer to a navigational instrument than a tribunal. It aims to help individuals and communities distinguish between those who contribute to a healthier moral information environment and those who systematically degrade it.

The paper argues that such a framework is thinkable, that its moral reference should be constructed from the best inheritances humanity has produced, and that any serious attempt to implement it must be transparent, limited, contestable, and resistant to abuse. It further argues that MQ should be

understood not only as a moral lens, but as a numerically expressed index: imperfect, interpretive, and yet useful precisely because numerical expression allows comparison, threshold-setting, and pattern recognition. In a later and separate framework, MQ may stand alongside IQ as a second numerical axis in a private filtering system; but in this paper it remains a stand-alone concept focused solely on the moral dimension of public behavior.

While MQ is defined here strictly in terms of observable public behavior, it is natural to view such behavior as a projection of underlying moral disposition. In that sense, MQ may be understood more broadly as applying to individuals, while remaining in this paper deliberately grounded in what can be publicly observed, evaluated, and contested.

Introduction: From Filtration to Saturation

There was never a golden age of perfect truth. Books could mislead. Newspapers could slander. Radio could inflame. Television could trivialize. Every era produced lies, vanity, sensationalism, and organized distortion. Yet the older media order contained something that, in retrospect, appears increasingly important: **friction**. Not moral perfection, but friction; not immunity from corruption, but resistance to total saturation.

In the era of books, newspapers, radio, and even television, content typically passed through visible layers of mediation. Editors stood between impulse and publication. Publishers carried reputational risk. Broadcast institutions had names, addresses, histories, and liabilities. Even disreputable outlets were often socially legible as disreputable. “Yellow press” was not merely present; it was named. The label itself became a kind of warning. One could still consume trash, but one usually knew one was entering the trash bin.

That older world was not simply better. It was narrower, slower, and capable of excluding valid voices along with destructive ones. But it possessed something that much of today’s social media environment lacks: a recognizable distinction between signal and contamination. The bad was present, yet it did not automatically drown out the good. The trace of tar was tolerated as a regrettable impurity within an otherwise sweet barrel of honey.

Today, that relationship often appears inverted. Social platforms have democratized publication, weakened gatekeeping, accelerated imitation, and placed enormous weight on the mechanics of engagement. News now reaches many people through social platforms rather than primarily through news institutions, and public trust in information from social media remains substantial, especially among younger adults. Reuters Institute and Pew have both documented the growing role of social platforms, personalities, and influencers in how people encounter information online.

This change is not merely technological. It is moral, psychological, and civilizational. Systems optimized for attention are not neutral toward content. They tend to reward what is emotionally activating, reputationally dramatic, and easily shareable. Research on digital behavior has repeatedly suggested that outrage, negativity, and emotionally charged content often achieve disproportionate reach online.

This does not mean that social media creates evil from nothing. It means that it often amplifies the morally and cognitively combustible. It lowers the cost of expression, raises the reward for provocation, and reduces the social distance between impulse and broadcast. In such an environment, truth does not automatically prevail by being true, and decency does not automatically prevail by being decent. The problem is not only noise. It is also interference: propaganda, strategic manipulation, coordinated distortion, and the increasingly deliberate use of amplification against moral and cognitive restraint.

Honey does not lose its sweetness. It is simply drowned out.

It is from this inversion that the proposal for MQ begins.

A brief clarification may be useful. The idea of quantifying moral disposition is not entirely new. Psychology has developed instruments for measuring moral preferences or foundations, and in some educational or organizational settings the phrase “Moral Quotient” has been used in other senses. But the present proposal is narrower and more practical. It is not a questionnaire about private values, and it is not an institutional human-resources metric. It is a proposed index of observable public media behavior.

The Need for a New Social Concept

The modern public sphere contains countless forms of ranking. We rank popularity, engagement, reach, influence, virality, sentiment, credibility, authority, expertise, and trust. We rank products, drivers, buyers, hosts, guests, sellers, borrowers, and employees. We rate almost everything. Yet when it comes to the moral quality of public conduct, we oscillate between two unsatisfying extremes. On one side lies total relativism: morality is private, unstable, and therefore cannot be spoken of seriously in public analysis. On the other side lies blunt moralism: denunciation, tribal branding, moral grandstanding, and selective outrage.

MQ is meant as neither. It begins from a simpler observation: the public sphere already contains moral judgments whether we acknowledge them or not. When a person repeatedly lies, degrades, incites, humiliates, manipulates, dehumanizes, or celebrates cruelty, people do not experience those actions as morally neutral. They already register them morally. They simply do so chaotically, tribally, inconsistently, and without a common language that could refine those judgments into something more disciplined.

The proposal, then, is not to invent morality from scratch. It is to ask whether a more explicit and structured language can be created for assessing public moral behavior as behavior.

That language need not do everything at once. There is a difference between what is true, what is intelligently argued, and what is morally conducted. These dimensions overlap, but they are not identical. MQ, as proposed here, concerns itself with the third. It does not attempt to measure the full cognitive quality of an argument, nor does it attempt to solve the larger philosophical problem of truth. It focuses on the moral character of visible public conduct.

That distinction matters. MQ is not about hidden motives. It is not about theological salvation. It is not about the totality of a human being. It is not about private life concealed from public view. It is about what a person makes visible through repeated media behavior: what he affirms, excuses, rewards, attacks, distorts, tolerates, and normalizes before others.

The central claim of this paper is simple: in an age where public discourse is increasingly shaped by algorithmic amplification rather than editorial filtration, society may need a new concept that evaluates not merely what is popular or engaging, but what is morally constructive or morally corrosive in public expression. That concept is MQ.

Defining the Boundaries of MQ

MQ must be understood with care.

It does not attempt to measure a person's inner character, private intentions, or ultimate moral worth. It does not claim to evaluate the soul. It does not seek to determine belief, conscience, or personal identity. Instead, MQ is deliberately confined to a narrower and more defensible domain: the observable patterns of behavior individuals choose to express in public media environments.

This distinction is central. Human beings are not reducible to their public expressions. They are capable of contradiction, growth, correction, and change. MQ does not deny that complexity. It simply does not attempt to measure it.

What MQ does attempt to measure is the recurrent moral posture displayed in public—the patterns that emerge over time through repeated expression, interaction, and response. It does not measure hidden motive directly. It measures publicly enacted pattern.

Equally important is what MQ is not intended to become. It is not a tool of enforcement, not a mechanism for restricting speech, and not a system for assigning rights or penalties. It belongs neither to the state nor to institutions of coercion. It is not designed to silence, but to interpret. In that sense, MQ is not an instrument of authority. It is an instrument of orientation and selection.

On the Moral Reference: Not Invented, but Inherited

The question naturally arises: who defines the moral standard?

The answer proposed here is: we do not decide morality in the sense of inventing it *ex nihilo*. We assemble a practical moral reference from the best inheritances humanity has already produced. The claim is not that all traditions say the same thing, but that enough convergence exists on core civilizational prohibitions and obligations to make a practical reference possible.

Every civilization has generated moral language. The languages differ, but their recurring centers are not infinitely distant from one another. Across religions, philosophies, civic traditions, and ethical systems, one repeatedly encounters condemnation of deceit, cruelty, humiliation, betrayal, needless violence, predation upon the weak, and delight in corruption. One repeatedly encounters praise of honesty, restraint, fairness, courage, mercy, accountability, fidelity, reciprocity, dignity, and protection of the vulnerable. The formulations vary, but the center persists.

This does not erase conflict between traditions. It does not solve all moral disputes. It does not produce a single infallible code. But it does suggest that humanity has already accumulated a substantial moral inheritance from which a practical reference can be drawn.

That reference, in the view advanced here, should not be framed as sectarian dogma. Nor should it be emptied into sterile procedural language. It should be built from the best moral deposits of civilization: the religious traditions that taught restraint and accountability before something higher than appetite; the philosophical traditions that taught self-command and justice; the civic traditions that dignified rights, duties, and lawful equality; the historical lessons paid for by catastrophe.

Such a reference will never be perfect or final. But neither is a standard meter perfect because no material object is metaphysically ideal. Standards exist because practical life requires shared reference points. MQ would require the same humility. It would be a constructed standard, not an absolute revelation.

Why the Media Sphere Is the Right Domain

A further question follows. Even if one grants that moral behavior can be discussed, why should MQ focus on the media sphere?

Because that is where modern character is increasingly performed, displayed, and judged in public. In previous eras, one's public footprint was smaller, slower, and more local. Today, millions of people create a persistent moral trail through posts, reposts, comments, endorsements, pile-ons, strategic silences, selective outrage, ritual humiliation, applause for falsehood, indifference to retraction, and reward structures built around spectacle. Public media behavior is no longer peripheral to social life. It has become one of the primary stages on which judgment, status, and collective mood are formed.

The media sphere is also uniquely suited to MQ for a practical reason: it provides data that are already public. The aim is not to invade privacy but to examine what individuals themselves choose to project outward. This makes the domain at once more limited and more defensible. That practical limit matters. A usable index must begin where observation is possible, contestable, and externally visible.

Such a system would not ask, "What kind of soul is this?" It would ask, "What kind of moral pattern does this person repeatedly enact in public view?"

That question is both narrower and more answerable.

Toward the Dimensions of MQ

For MQ to function meaningfully, it must rest on identifiable dimensions of behavior—dimensions that can be evaluated with some discipline. These dimensions should not collapse into ideology. They should describe morally relevant patterns visible across ideological camps.

The dimensions themselves should be concrete enough to evaluate and broad enough to remain cross-tribal. One dimension is truth orientation: whether an individual shows concern for what is true, corrects himself when shown to be wrong, or instead treats truth as a disposable tool. Another is fairness in representation: whether opponents are described honestly or caricatured for gain, whether quotation is contextual or manipulative, whether criticism remains distinguishable from fabrication. A third is method of disagreement: whether substance is met with substance, or whether mockery, humiliation, slander, and dehumanization take the place of argument.

Other dimensions follow naturally. Moral asymmetry asks whether principles are applied consistently or only tribally, whether one excuses in allies what one condemns in enemies. Relationship to harm asks whether avoidable harm is incited, whether humiliation is celebrated, whether cruelty becomes a form of entertainment. Respect for dignity asks whether, even in forceful disagreement, some minimal recognition of the other as a person remains intact. Responsibility under influence asks whether growing reach produces greater care or greater recklessness. Pattern stability asks whether the conduct is occasional and corrected, or recurrent, strategic, and identity-forming.

These are not final categories. They are first approximations. But they show the path. MQ should measure patterns, not isolated slips. The aim is not to weaponize one regrettable sentence. The aim is to identify durable modes of public moral conduct.

The Case for Structured Evaluation

Why not leave all of this qualitative?

Because the public sphere is now too large, too fast, and too saturated for purely intuitive sorting to remain adequate. Human beings already make rapid judgments about who is credible, decent, reckless, malicious, or corrupted. But these judgments are fragmented, inconsistent, and often manipulated by aesthetics, tribe, charisma, and repetition.

Quantification, when done honestly, does not replace judgment. It disciplines it. That is precisely why MQ is proposed as a numerically expressed index rather than as a purely verbal label. Numerical expression does not eliminate interpretation, but it does make comparison, threshold-setting, and pattern recognition possible in a way that purely descriptive language often cannot sustain. A number is not the truth of a person, nor should it pretend to be. But as a disciplined summary of recurrent public behavior, it can become a useful tool.

The danger of quantification is false certainty. The value of quantification is explicitness. Once criteria are named, weights disclosed, and methods exposed, a framework becomes open to criticism, refinement, and comparison. Hidden judgment becomes visible judgment. That is an advantage.

The argument for MQ is therefore not that morality can be reduced fully to arithmetic. It is that some morally relevant public patterns can be made explicit enough to support disciplined numerical expression without pretending that the numerical form exhausts the human reality behind it.

A score would never be the whole truth. But a score built from disclosed criteria may still be more honest than the opaque swarm judgments already ruling the digital crowd.

Freedom, Filtering, and the Risk of Misuse

Any proposal that sounds like “scoring morality” immediately raises legitimate alarm, and it should.

The modern world has good reason to fear systems that classify persons. The concern is not imaginary. Contemporary law and policy have already begun drawing hard lines against certain forms of social scoring tied to rights, treatment, or access. The European Union’s AI Act, for example, explicitly prohibits certain kinds of social scoring and treats them as unacceptable-risk practices.

That warning must be taken seriously. In fact, it sharpens this paper’s argument.

The proposal here is not for public authority to rank citizens morally and attach consequences to that ranking. It is not for a bank to deny credit because of MQ, an employer to blacklist workers because of MQ, or a government to regulate speech through MQ. Those would be corruptions of the concept and should be rejected in advance. The legitimacy of MQ depends precisely on refusing its conversion into a compulsory civic ranking system.

MQ, as proposed here, belongs first to the domain of voluntary interpretation and private navigation. Its purpose is to help individuals understand and filter the kind of public moral environment they are willing to inhabit. Just as one may choose to avoid a neighborhood, a television channel, or a dinner companion because of repeated patterns of conduct, one may also wish to avoid a public feed shaped by people whose visible media behavior repeatedly degrades truth, dignity, and proportion.

In that sense, MQ is not a tool of domination. It is a proposed tool of moral self-protection.

The distinction is essential: censorship says, “You may not speak.” MQ, properly limited, says, “I do not have to invite every form of public conduct into my mental life on equal terms.”

Why This Matters Now

The pressure to develop something like MQ arises not only from annoyance or nostalgia, but from a deeper civilizational problem.

Modern information systems are no longer merely channels through which society communicates. They are environments in which attention is conditioned, moral perception is shaped, and public emotion is coordinated. Public-health authorities, journalists, and researchers alike have warned that modern digital environments enable misinformation to spread with unusual speed and scale, especially through social media.

That observation concerns misinformation directly, but the broader lesson extends beyond medicine or fact-checking. Not all degradation of the public sphere is accidental. Some of it is produced by intelligence used without moral restraint: cleverness in the service of manipulation, strategy without conscience, and persuasion detached from responsibility. A fuller account of the public information environment will eventually need to distinguish moral quality from cognitive power, even where the two interact.

A society that loses the ability to distinguish truth from manipulation, seriousness from performance, or decency from spectacle does not simply become noisier. It becomes more governable by appetite, panic, tribal reflex, and theatrical malice.

MQ is one attempt to suggest that the information environment should not be evaluated only in cognitive terms, and not only in political terms, but also in moral terms. The question is not merely whether content is factual or false, though that matters enormously. The question is also what kind of character becomes normalized when millions are rewarded for public behavior that is dishonest, degrading, cynical, and morally unserious.

The public sphere teaches. Even when it pretends merely to entertain, it teaches. It teaches by repetition, reward, imitation, permission, and spectacle. It teaches what one may do to others and still be applauded.

An age that has built powerful systems for amplifying expression may need equally serious systems for evaluating the moral quality of what is being amplified.

A First Ethical Principle of MQ

The first ethical principle of MQ is simple and non-negotiable:

MQ must never be allowed to become a coercive instrument detached from context and consequences.

That principle has immediate consequences for design and use.

First, MQ must be transparent. Hidden models that generate moral scores in secret would be intolerable.

Second, MQ must be contestable. A person should be able to inspect the basis of a score and challenge errors.

Third, MQ must be contextual. Quotation, irony, rebuttal, repentance, and correction must matter.

Fourth, MQ must evaluate patterns rather than isolated moments.

Fifth, MQ must remain limited to the domain for which it is designed: public media behavior.

Sixth, MQ must resist ideological capture by making its core dimensions as cross-civilizational and non-tribal as possible.

Without these constraints, the concept would be too easy to weaponize. With them, it may at least become discussable.

Conclusion

The proposal for MQ arises from a simple perception: the moral structure of the public media environment has changed, and not for the better. Earlier media systems contained corruption, but they also contained friction. They did not eliminate tar, but they prevented tar from becoming the native fluid of public life. Today, much of the digital sphere rewards what is corrosive more efficiently than what is constructive. It does not always create corruption, but it often amplifies it, aestheticizes it, and extends its reach.

In that altered environment, the old assumption that truth and decency will somehow sort themselves out by mere exposure appears increasingly weak. Popularity is not moral authority. Virality is not civic worth. Engagement is not character.

MQ is therefore proposed—not as an answer, but as a beginning. It is not a judgment of souls, not a mandate of the state, not a substitute for conscience, and not an instrument for stripping rights. It is a framework for seeing more clearly what kinds of public conduct are being normalized, rewarded, and allowed into our lives.

Humanity has already built many tools for measuring power, speed, intelligence, efficiency, profitability, and influence. It may now need a more serious language for measuring whether visible public conduct contributes to a healthier moral atmosphere or to a more polluted one.

We do not need to pretend that such a task is easy. It is not easy. It is dangerous if done carelessly. It invites resistance because it touches one of the deepest modern anxieties: the fear that morality, once formalized, becomes tyranny.

That fear is real. But the opposite danger is also real: that by refusing to speak clearly about moral degradation in the public sphere, we surrender the field entirely to systems that already rank everything except what matters most.

What was once a barrel of honey with a trace of tar has indeed, in many places, become a barrel of tar with a trace of honey. The task is not to dream ourselves backward. The task is to ask whether, in the age we actually inhabit, we can build a lens that helps us recognize honey again—and refuse to mistake tar for freedom merely because it is loud.

If such a lens can be made numerically disciplined without becoming coercive, it may later stand alongside other evaluative dimensions in helping individuals shape a more livable informational world.

It is also reasonable to ask whether MQ ultimately applies not only to behavior, but to people themselves. In practice, this distinction may be less rigid than it appears. What we repeatedly express in public is rarely disconnected from what we are willing to accept, tolerate, or justify. MQ, as defined here, does not claim to measure the inner person. But it does measure the visible pattern through which the inner person becomes known to others.

MQ does not claim to measure the soul. But over time, it measures the pattern through which the soul becomes visible.

Appendix: Conceptual Design of an MQ Application

If MQ is to remain only a philosophical phrase, it will eventually dissolve into rhetoric. The concept becomes socially meaningful only if one can imagine a practical instrument built around it. What follows is not a final engineering specification, but a structured picture of what an MQ app could look like.

The first principle of the app must be modesty. It should not present itself as a machine that knows morality. It should present itself as a transparent evaluator of recurrent public behavior according to disclosed criteria. Its output could be expressed as a numerical index or score band, but only when shown together with the visible dimensions, confidence level, and examples that generated it. The app would not peer into private communications, secret records, or personal associations hidden from view. Its data source would be limited to material intentionally made public by the individual: posts, replies, reposts, quoted commentary, public endorsements, and observable interaction patterns across media platforms.

The second principle must be behavior over identity. The app should not begin from ideology, party, religion, ethnicity, status, nationality, or other identity markers. It should begin from conduct. Does the person repeatedly distort? Does he habitually dehumanize? Does he weaponize falsehood? Does he correct errors? Does he engage opponents fairly? Does he celebrate humiliation? Does he use influence recklessly? These questions are morally relevant regardless of tribe.

The third principle must be pattern over incident. A serious MQ app should avoid score shocks caused by isolated moments. Human beings misspeak, react emotionally, joke badly, quote others critically, and change over time. The app would therefore need temporal smoothing. It would detect repeated patterns, not merely explosive fragments.

Technically, one can imagine the app as operating in several layers.

The first layer would be a public-content ingestion layer. This layer would collect public posts and interactions from the relevant platform APIs or lawful scraping interfaces where permitted. It would preserve timestamps, thread context, quoted content, and indicators of whether a statement was original, endorsed, rebutted, or merely repeated.

The second layer would be a contextual interpretation layer. Here, language models and rule-based systems would work together. Pure statistical models would be too opaque and too vulnerable to ideological drift. Pure rule systems would be too brittle. A hybrid system would likely perform better: one part trained to identify morally relevant linguistic patterns, another part constrained by explicit human-readable rules. This layer would attempt to distinguish assertion from quotation, condemnation from endorsement, and correction from repetition.

The third layer would be a criterion-scoring layer. Each public action would be evaluated across several MQ dimensions such as truth orientation, fairness of representation, method of disagreement, consistency of principle, relationship to cruelty, respect for human dignity, and responsibility under influence. These dimensions could be scored separately before being aggregated. The app should avoid the false simplicity of one magical number appearing from nowhere. A dashboard showing subcomponents would be more honest.

The fourth layer would be an aggregation and confidence layer. Not every score should be equally trusted. A person with very little public content should generate only a low-confidence estimate. A person with large amounts of public behavior, over time, would yield a more stable reading. The app should therefore include confidence intervals or reliability bands rather than treating every score as equally firm.

The fifth layer would be a challenge and audit layer. This is morally essential. Users should be able to inspect examples contributing to a score. Independent auditors should be able to examine the scoring logic. Errors should be contestable. If the app cannot explain why it produced a score, it should not produce one.

The sixth layer would be a mode-of-use layer. This is where the app's philosophy becomes concrete. The app should be designed primarily for voluntary informational use. A user may view a person's MQ profile, inspect the dimensions behind it, or choose to apply a private content filter in his own feed based on MQ thresholds once that later concept is developed. What the app should not do is automate penalties, report people to authorities, or silently blacklist them across systems.

One can also imagine a "slow mode" as part of the app's design. In slow mode, the app would not score a fast-moving controversy immediately. It would wait for context, corrections, clarifications, and temporal stabilization. This would reduce the danger of instant moral flash judgments produced by partial information.

Open source or near-open auditability would be highly desirable. Given the sensitivity of MQ, the public should be able to inspect not only broad principles but much of the operational logic. Black-box morality would be worse than the problem it seeks to solve.

For uninitiated readers, the simplest way to picture the app is this: not as a divine judge, not as a police officer, but as a morally tuned reputation microscope aimed only at what people choose to display publicly and repeatedly. For knowledgeable readers, the deeper challenge is obvious: the system would sit at the difficult intersection of natural-language processing, ethics, platform governance, and civil liberties. That is exactly why its design must remain transparent, narrow, and limited in ambition.

The app, in other words, should not pretend to solve morality. It should help reveal morally relevant patterns already operating in plain sight. In that form, MQ would remain meaningful as a stand-alone index while also being structurally compatible, in a later and separate framework, with other indices used for private filtering and personal information selection.