[**Media on a wire**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1719650/media-on-a-wire)

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The writer is researching newsroom culture in Pakistan.

JOURNALISTS make mistakes. Even the ones that think they’re better than everyone else and then one day have spectacular falls from grace and are consigned to the dustbin of history. I would cite the following examples in my classes to remind journalism students of the consequences of mistakes made by the media.

There’s the infamously incorrect Chicago Tribune headline in November 1948 ‘Dewey Defeats Truman’ when Democratic candidate Harry Truman had, in fact, won an upset victory. A few newspapers reported that no one died on the Titanic when in reality 1,500 died. From more recent times, one will remember the reporting on the Boston marathon bombing in 2013, when the New York Post ran a photo of two men with the headline ‘Feds seek these two pictured at Boston Marathon’. Except that was not the case but the damage was done. The Spanish paper El Pais ran an image of a very sick-looking Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, at a time when very little was known about his health. Except the image turned out to be false and the paper had to apologise.

The New York Times has a treasure trove of errors and retractions and inquiries to demonstrate that they too are not infallible.

Their one-time rising star reporter in the early 2000s Jayson Blair may be the best known plagiarist in modern times. Not only was he plagiarising, he was reporting from places he didn’t even travel to. And of course who can forget the Times’ peddling of (uncorroborated) stories about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction.

It’s important for media outlets to cross their t’s and dot their i’s.

Perhaps the most damning recent controversy centres around its 2018 popular podcast Caliphate by Rukmini Callimachi about a young Canadian man who went to Syria and joined Islamic State and became an executioner before fleeing. The podcast received much praise and a Peabody award but, in 2020, Canadian authorities accused the man of lying and charged him for fabricating terrorism acts. Journalists too had raised questions about Callimachi’s story but she had initially dismissed those criticisms and then double downed on them, going so far as to question the competence of the Canadian authorities’ investigation.

In the end, the paper had to retract the story, return the awards and Callimachi was taken off the terrorism beat. I was reminded of this particular incident while reading the fiasco that was The Wire versus Meta over in India.

Last month, independent digital outlet The Wire published a story claiming that the BJP’s Amit Malviya, who heads the party’s IT cell, had extensive power to take down Instagram posts he found offensive. The Wire accused Malviya of being part of Meta’s XCheck, which The Verge describes as “a crosscheck system that lets certain high-profile users avoid the platform’s typical moderation policies, and that’s what allowed him to get away with removing the post” — and The Wire said they had the evidence to prove it.

Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, denied the claim saying it was fabricated. The Wire doubled down and published internal emails from Meta which turned out to be fake. By then, many had raised questions about the veracity of the story. Eventually The Wire suspended its stories, and said it would conduct an external review, stopping short of a full retraction. It issued an apology on Oct 27 to its readers, but not to Meta or Malviya. The BJP leader has filed charges against The Wire and police in Delhi raided the homes and office of The Wire editors. On its part, The Wire has filed charges against its researcher for “forgery and fabrication”.

It is an ongoing messy situation but The Wire should be lauded for accepting the stories did not hold up to their standards and for taking “moral responsibility for the omission”. One hopes they will regain the trust of their readers — as have other erring media outlets before this.

At the risk of sounding conspiratorial, it may be prudent to mention a theory that The Wire was duped. It’s been a vocal critic of the Modi administration which is no stranger to restricting freedoms. Nationalists and hyper-patriotic media are having a field day in ‘exposing’ The Wire’s agenda to ‘defame India’.

Media ecosystems everywhere need independent outlets that can hold the powerful to account, especially when mainstream media is increasingly failing in its job of doing so. It becomes more important for media outlets like The Wire to do better in crossing their t’s and dotting their i’s as the stakes are too high. The Modi government has its fangs out for any critical voice and that must be resisted. As the Society of Professional Journalists notes: the biggest stakeholders are citizens of democracies, which depend on journalists to grow trust in readers with accurate reporting.

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