**The perils of breaking news**

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Ever since electronic media came to dominate the information landscape of Pakistan some two decades ago, the people, as the foremost consumers of news, have been gripped by the phenomenon generally referred to as ‘breaking news’. The gradual increase in the number of news TV channels meant that there would be tougher competition for exploring news stories and then breaking them to an ever-eager audience.

Two factors drove the maddening rush for exclusive news stories. First, TV channels understood the importance of establishing their footprint and together with the ensuing commentary and analysis, sourcing of news stories heralded the arrival of a tough competitor on the news circuit. Second, the grabbing of a maximum number of viewers’ attention, a purpose well served by the exclusive nature of news stories, made concerned TV channel(s) the preferred platforms for the advertisers.

This wild competition among TV channels fed into the culture of breaking news. Those curating the news at the decision-making positions in news organisations knew that they had a loyal and eager viewership ready to assimilate news and views. Every time a news channel suspended its routine transmission to break news with news presenters often speaking at the top of their voices, people’s attention would easily be drawn to their TV screens with bated breath.

[Somali military kills 28 al-Shabaab terrorists in 48 hours](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/somali-military-kills-28-al-shabaab-terrorists-in-48-hours)

The Cambridge dictionary defines breaking news as “information that is being received or broadcast about an event that has just happened or just began.” As time wore on, the ‘much-celebrated’ breaking news started to lose its appeal, more importantly its ‘newsiness’ and looking mundane and clichéd in the process. In many cases, it became a euphemism for sensationalism. News stories that might not pass the basic test of being incorporated into the news bulletin began to be broadcast as breaking news.

This trivialisation of breaking news has been identified as a marked feature of Pakistani news media. Critics have found faults, often on justified grounds, with the very manner of news selection, the adherence of the process with the established journalistic practices and even the very professionalism of those manning news organisations.

With digital and social media becoming a powerful new fad, citizens now feel more empowered, often relying on mainstream media as the primary source of their information; the perils associated with the breaking news culture have acquired more urgency.

[Western Balkans see highest COVID deaths per 100,000 globally](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/western-balkans-see-highest-covid-deaths-per-100-000-globally)

Hence there has been a heightened debate on how electronic media in particular, should revisit the standard operating procedures to cover a crisis situation that may have implications for national security, religious harmony and safety of people’s lives. In the backdrop of the Murree tragedy, some well-deserved critique has been offered on the media’s role in covering the related events.

Among the factors responsible for what one would describe as ‘questionable’ breaking news culture for want of any proper word is the mismatch between the horizontal expansion of news channels and the supply of skilled and qualified human resources. A majority of journalists who joined the electronic media belonged to print media.

Barring a few exceptions, they did not get time to bridge the transition gaps between both the mediums. Nor have any organised training programmes been offered to adequately equip them with the tools, techniques and processes required for their new role in the electronic media field. This lack of professional training means that their learning has essentially been on the job.

[4.5 magnitude earthquake jolts parts of Swat](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2022/4-5-magnitude-earthquake-jolts-parts-of-swat)

The ‘questionable’ breaking news culture has become rampant because of the absence of effective editorial oversight within the TV channels. Editorial oversight serves as a check and balance mechanism on the reporters and sets the parameters that a news story has to comply with before it can be aired.

The editorial staff are often the most experienced professionals having a penetrating understanding of the field as well as of a broader context within which the news has to be curated and then broadcast. They ensure the compliance of broadcasts with the basics of journalism. When breaking news does not break anymore and is readily dismissed by viewers, it only shows that the editorial oversight system is not working.

Invariably in most cases, TV channels have been driven by cut-throat competition for ratings, which means a haste to locate and broadcast a news story without processing it through the usual checks and balances of the news verification process. The tendency to be the first channel to break the news has not only weakened editorial oversight but also been a reason for the broadcast of substandard news.

[PSL 2022: Peshawar Zalmi beat Quetta Gladiators in nail-biting thriller](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2022/psl-2022-peshawar-zalmi-beat-quetta-gladiators-in-nail-biting-thriller)

Since the majority of the TV networks are owned by large business groups, their commercial interests, at times, interfere with the actual working of their organisations. The idea of media cross-ownership has affected editorial autonomy and has not been successful in ensuring diversity in opinions. This has implications for the editorial decision-making on what or what to not broadcast as the breaking news.

The ‘questionable’ breaking news culture has been cited as a sufficient reason for putting in place some kind of ‘code of conduct’ to avert the pitfalls of broadcasts. It has genuinely eroded the credibility of the media as a fair, bipartisan reporter of the events and educator of its viewers, helping them make sense of the complex world around them.

The weakening faith of the people in media credibility has resulted in reduced interest of the viewers in the current affairs programmes. This trend has serious commercial implications for the media organisations. A shift towards digital media is already underway, which means that advertisers have found more partners to work with and get their message across to the target audience based on a careful examination of the data analytics.

[Anarkali bomb blast: JIT constituted for investigation](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2022/anarkali-bomb-blast-jit-constituted-for-investigation)

The compromised and trivialised nature of breaking news wreaks greater havoc than is generally understood. Over time, a weak media, suffering from a trust deficit, cannot play its part in strengthening democracy, the rule of law and the citizens’ right to information. While those looking to profit from the skewed media operations may make financial gains, the loss of society is, however, deep and strategic.

Fake news and disinformation are the bane of our times, whose pitfalls have become increasingly known. A compromised media becomes a source of peddling flawed narratives and launching disinformation campaigns. The biggest danger of fake news is that it undermines people’s trust in the media as a credible institution capable of offering honest reportage and authentic critiques.

The ‘questionable’ breaking news culture offers a moment of reflection for our media professionals to put their heads together and review the challenges that are staring the media organisations in the face in terms of credibility, neutrality and fair play. It calls for putting in place filters in the news cycle from reporting to the dissemination of a story to make it correspond to the news values.

While hands-on experience may turn out to be beneficial, there is still a dire need for media organisations to introduce training courses for working journalists. Equally important is an institutional analysis of the perils of fake news and disinformation and the need for redesigning internal systems to check its incidence. There is a lot that can be learned from the world’s best practices on countering fake news.

Media organisations need to rise to the challenges of a digital era by initiating an honest appraisal of the processes. Not doing so is not an option any more.