



Who Breaks My News? – Business of Breaking News and its Retention Value

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Abstract

Today we are breathing the air of information. Communication has become a necessity and it is fast evolving into a powerful social currency. Exchange of information is shaping the world around us by the minute. In such a dynamic set-up no other medium has risen in prominence than the television medium. One of the major factors behind its exponential rise has been the growth of 24x7 news channels.

News is a genre which is directly associated with the people. It may be that a news story is interesting or informative, that it directly affects us, that it makes us pause and think or evokes our compassion, anger or concerns. In a globalised world today, news is meant to represent an interface between the public and ideas about 'the truth out there.' The Breaking News format is the most exploited news presentation technique by news channels which are on the air the whole day. The format boasts of speed, exclusivity and news of immediate relevance. The reality of it is something quite different. Breaking news stories work on people's limited literacy and naivety that leads them to believe further that what they see is real and every new piece of information is breaking news. The viewers get a concatenation of news without following up the previous day's stories and a false sense of 'enlightenment.' The excessive dramatics and cleverly devised presentation strategy behind the Breaking News phenomenon have altered the profile of a news programming. Such a trend is showing signs of long term impact on how people take news and how it impacts our understanding of the world.

This paper is an outcome of study oriented project that is aimed at understanding the correlation between the rushed and dramatic dissipation of news in the Breaking News format and its retention value. The study has looked at the presentation techniques and the evolution of news programming of prominent English News channels to observe the trends. It traces that there is a conformable symbiosis between the viewers and the news channels which is driving the success of the Breaking News format. Also the authors argue if eventually any value addition takes place when a news story is tagged as Breaking News.

Keywords: *Breaking news, retention value, globalization, 24x7 media*

Introduction

Information is the currency of the new age. With rapid globalization, the distances have decreased significantly. As the mediums of information dissipation increase, so does the amount of information. The superhighway is jammed with news from around the globe. In such an interconnected world, an earthquake in Japan affects a Tsunami in the Indian Ocean. A major Cancer research in Moscow affects millions in Delhi. The sources of information are varied according to nature, availability and impact. With information, people associate freedom; the freedom of having an opinion which requires information as a precursor. The concept of informing people of the incidents and news from far away took its birth as a consequence of human curiosity and care. With the discovery of radio waves by Marconi and other contemporaries, the watershed moment had arrived. Now news could be transmitted between worlds far apart. Moreover, New Media has forced the changes in speed of dispatch and the concept of reach of any other media. Pages of print are changing too often today, unconventional to the editorial policy. Even 24/7 TV channels are juggling with their content with changed slots because New Media gives an enhanced exposure to the consumers 24x7 and worldwide (Ravi, 2011).

Breaking News Phenomenon

With time, the significance and impact of news has changed drastically. The impact of news has been significant as it has changed mind-sets, and the society's shape and form in many ways. Our airspace is filled with hundreds of news channels across several languages. The Breaking News phenomenon is the brainchild of a widespread mind-set. We have welcomed the idea of acquiring information by intrusion. The TV Media has served our needs to the excess. It's interesting how the presentation style has been manipulated to get the point across if there's any. A critical study of the phenomenon will not only help us understand the media's perspective in presenting information and their motives but also aims to let us reflect on how we as a society, handle news and how the flow of news is a crucial aspect in making and breaking opinions. Are these news channels the agents of participatory democracy or purveyors of consumer capitalism? (Murphy, 2007). It needs to understand that what is the impact and validity of such news items and how far these stories reshape societies and democratize the flow of information.

Beginning of Breaking News

Journalism is about bravely finding the facts and delivering them to the public with neutrality so that truth can be known (Machin & Niblock, 2006). The origin of the concept of a Breaking News was much more subtle and relevant. When the concept was introduced it was to bring important stories having high news value to the viewer's attention by interrupting any regular programming. In the beginning, programming interruptions were restricted to extremely urgent news. Exclusivity of coverage gains importance in such "Breaking News" as everybody is in the race to air it first in their respective channels. Even Associated Press (AP) credits its credibility to its ability to break stories before others. In their glorious history, AP has been the first to tell the world of many of history's most important moments, from the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the bombing of Pearl Harbour to the fall of the Shah of Iran and the death of Pope John Paul II.

Today most 24 Hour News channels live and breathe with the help of "Breaking News". The term breaking news has come to replace the older use of news bulletin. Though such coverage gets its share of eyeballs, all viewers do not agree that stories assigned with the "breaking news" tag rise to the significance or level of interest. In early coverage of a breaking story, the channels share sketchy details, which for them is a better option than waiting for the facts and airing the news relatively later than other competing channels. The concept is exploited to the maximum when the channels use it to fill their 24 hour timeline of a day. BREAKING NEWS is rephrased as of JUST IN, BREAKING NOW in various news channels in an attempt to catch attention.

Packaging of sensationalism

According to many studies, the role of journalists as eyes and ears of public is questionable. Misrepresentation of international conflicts has led scholars such as Herman and Chomsky (1988) to speak of the propaganda role of the new media. Indian media takes many pages from the books of its western counterparts. CNN, Fox News and many more rely on serving news with drama, fervour, and aims for impact head on. Most popular stories are market-driven chatter that's from another planet in comparison to the high-minded and ideological journalism now antiquated. News media carry a social responsibility to help the citizens gain knowledge through information. It ensures that such an informed public sustains a free democratic society. Verifying facts, going in depth before reporting, ensuring sincere sources, such aspects of classic journalism are low down the priority as the subsequent higher comparative viewership is the top priority. The font size, colour and presentation reflect the intent. The title has huge font size, red

colour and explosive effects with accompanying music. Such a dramatic sequence signals the arrival of a Breaking News. Broadcast journalism is nowadays familiar with many of these techniques, but for all of the wrong reasons and with many of the worst applications. Pet rescues remind one of an advertising mnemonic. For every idiotic tear-jerker or cute clip a piece of real news goes wanting. It has become something of a commonplace that the only times a media outlet risks truth-telling is when a crisis requires showing some portion of the truth. *That is not good enough* (Herman, 2010). Hence, the presentation and tone gain importance. The viewer though has the power and choice to change channels sticks to one once he/she has been attracted by the coverage. The loud dramatic music makes sure that grabbing attention is not a cause of worry.

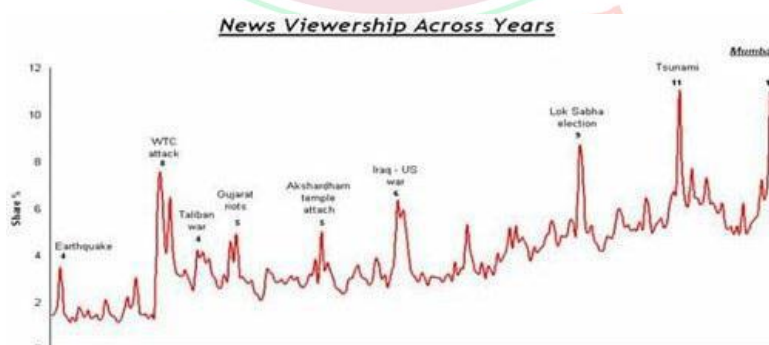
Live Coverage of 9/11 Mumbai Terror Attack

The tragic incident took place on 26th of November in the Taj Hotel. Terrorists had struck the city in several spots including the railway station and a famous café named Leopold café. Breaking News came in that the attack had taken place, several had been killed and Taj Hotel was under siege. The whole nation was shook to the core. The police sprang into action and special-forces were preparing for a planned counter attack. With them, the media didn't take much time either to reach the Taj Hotel and cover the story. As the area around the hotel was cordoned off due to security reasons, they couldn't curtail the camera or the ever sensationalistic mind-set of the journalists on the spot. Viewership went through the roof. TV News channels across the bandwidth showed live pictures from the places facing the crisis.

Unconfirmed reports were Breaking News for hours altogether, unofficial death tolls changed every few seconds. Terrorists were dead one instant and captured the other. The irresponsibility reached new heights as the cameras captured a survivor on some floor in the hotel and terrorists killed him within minutes as they had been following the broadcast from inside the hotel to keep a track of rescue operations. Phrases like "it all looks like an action movie", "the commandos will enter through that gate and attack with these guns" accompanied phrases of sympathy and tragedy. Images of the counter terrorism forces entering the hotel accompanied the narration. Even animated re-enactments were aired with unconfirmed details. Within no time exclusive Breaking News came to the front. "Times Now Exclusive Breaking News: Terrorist caught on camera." "Minute by minute development" was repeated. Without any respect to injured or dead, live pictures accompanied the Breaking News. Rajdeep Sardesai of CNN-IBN stated on air that

there had been fresh rounds of firing at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus on the Mumbai siege. This turned out to be a rumour, but his decision to go on air without get an authoritative corroboration shows him in poor light. The Breaking News tag didn't go off the screen for hours together and didn't make "sense" to remove it as the story developed. The Hindi TV channels did even worse. India TV aired exclusive interviews with two men they claimed to be the terrorists Shahadullah and Imran Babar, while they were wreaking havoc at the Taj and Nariman House. Selected few channels woke up to their conscience and declined airing unconfirmed and confidential information (Pathak, 2008).

The Breaking News phenomenon had succeeded but at a heavy price. It brought out the hard reality of how a society reacts in situations and how priorities are changed. The problem here is not with the concept of Breaking News but the media mind-set associated with it. As soon as the purpose of informing the public of any major incident is fulfilled, serious sincere reporting should kick in. Majority of today's media find it relevant to stick with the concept of bringing in news as it happens and as exclusively as possible. The reasons can be looked into from two perspectives: One from the media organizations' perspective and another from the viewer's perspective. Audiences are glued to a television with live images. A tragic incident is an event for the News channels and audiences seem to agree with them. The viewership of the live images in the line of Breaking News can be reflected well in the following graph showing TV News viewership from 2001-2008. All the incidents highlighted are based on live reporting. It doesn't take a Newtonian mind to intercept the meaning of the peaks in the terrain.



(Fig 1) (Source: TAM ratings)

Ratings of most channels recorded a significant growth in the week of Mumbai siege due to the live nonstop coverage of the Mumbai siege. NDTV 24x7 got 30 per cent of viewership, thus making it the highest gainer amongst the English channels. Times Now got 28 per cent, while

CNN-IBN received 24 per cent ratings during the four day period from November 26 to November 30. Amongst the Hindi channels, Aaj Tak ruled the roost with 23 per cent share of the viewership, while India TV got 21 per cent ratings. To sum it up, the immense advertising opportunities that such viewership offers is lucrative for many broadcasters to ignore (Pathak, 2008).

Breaking News: Goldmine

One major change among many over the years in the way TV news channels deal with stories is the thinning line between a news item and a news event. A news item contains well researched facts in a well composed sequence and contains visuals to support it. The news item is the oldest form of defining news from around the world. A media event is a happening; spontaneous or planned that attracts extensive media coverage. Immediacy is the most crucial aspect of reporting a media event. Important speeches by leaders, a political rally, a sporting event etc. were kept in this bracket till now. But today terrorist attacks, floods, tsunamis, wars and many such tragic and devastating incidents become a media event. The September 11 attacks turned out to be a global media event. Each channel competed with the other to show similar images in the most dramatic manner. The news value of the event can't be overlooked. Such events have huge impact on the society but the squabble between the channels is a dangerous trend. What this thinning line does is it gives the media organizations to base their ratings and hence profits, on the immediate minute by minute coverage of such events. They gladly use the shield of viewership to hide behind. Interestingly all war reporting and the most tragic of terrorist attacks reported in the Breaking News, dramatic manner attracts the highest eyeballs. The graph mentioned proves this beyond doubt. When the public is exposed to such raw reporting, the reactions, the opinions formed are far from ideal and hence the impact is short-lived. Have a look at an official advertising statement by Times of India on their website after the Ayodhya verdict. The pressures of a competitive market are evident: "Times Now notched up record viewership in the English news category on the day the Ayodhya title suit verdict was pronounced. According to viewership data released by aMap in the males above 25 years category in medium and large cities, Times Now notched 7.61 rating points compared to 3.77 of NDTV 24x7 and 4.06 of CNN IBN"(TNN, 2010).

Breaking News Pill: Impact

In today's Internet driven communication world, the logical explanation for much of the current news consumption patterns is the 24/7 news world. The apparent unlimited access to news and the countless channels have been able to present the public with excess. The public is exposed to a constant stream of headlines, facts and updates on major issues across the world. The viewers have the choice of either following stories to the end or form opinions based on initial Breaking News. The Breaking News phenomenon is the TV Journalism's answer to the threat posed by the ever rising numbers of consumers using Internet as their news source. But the paradox of choice has to be looked at closely to see the resulting impact. The abundance of news does not necessarily translate into a better intellectual environment for consumers. In a study conducted by the Associated Press (AP), the participants asserted that the Breaking News and headlines act like the preview or a trailer and the follow up is seen rarely. Bits and pieces of an ideal in-depth story are thrown around as headlines and breaking news. The journalistic substance of a Breaking News is nonexistent. This impact can be compared to that of a diet pill that ensures the basic nutrition values but cannot replace the experience of a balanced meal.

Awareness Or Short-term Self-Indulgence

The news consumer has evolved tremendously over the years, more so in the current decade. The media presents us a world without heroes. All the tragic breaking stories from around the world make the viewer feel desolate. In such a tight spot, the public attempts to be self-indulgent, trying any means to indulge in the scheme of things. Such indulgence when led to concrete action is the way to move forward. But the trend presents a very different picture of our society. The people are ready to take in the information but don't put the effort needed to digest it. The Breaking News and Headlines harp on this aspect of our contemporary society. Facts and awareness become social currency and in many cases a status symbol.

Before elaborating the issue, let us look at the viewership numbers from a recent news story. After the numerous scams around the 2G and the Commonwealth Games, the central government was under extreme scrutiny from the media, and the opposition. The Prime Minister on February 16, 2011 addressed editors of major TV news channels on this issue. The viewers were informed beforehand. The two hour interaction was broadcasted live and the viewership saw an unprecedented rise of 80%, rising from 5, 20,000 to 19, 99,000 viewers. Though the issues discussed had been prominent for months altogether, the public reaction was timid till this point. Not surprisingly, the numbers didn't stay the way for subsequent weeks (Pathak, 2008).

The example discussed above present us with interesting correlations. During major events, the society takes it on itself to be aware and have opinions. A well informed public is one of the bases of a strong democratic country like ours. But why do we not show the same awareness and eagerness to debate crucial issues in the absence of such powerful events? The larger question is why does it need a media event for us to discuss issues affecting our lives? The media finds it much to its pleasure to feed us and let us forget. In this case, the dangers of self-indulgence are far greater than non-indulgence. Breaking News format gives us the initial glimpse/ snapshot of what the story is. They evidently leave it to the audience's maturity to filter the information and fail to introspect whether breaking a news story without proper scrutiny is in the larger public interest.

Can Viewers Decide?

The freedom of choice gives the power to the viewer to change channels or refrain from viewing unconfirmed and sensationalistic Breaking News. But very few of us practice such a powerful right. CNN IBN conducted a half hour debate on the media reporting during the Mumbai attacks. The bullet by bullet commentary was under severe scrutiny. Rajdeep Sardesai accepted the charge and commented, "This is one of the constraints of running a 24 hour news channel. But...but...Ratings are showing people were hooked on to our news channel". The comment is representative of the community. He also accepted that in today's TV journalism, speed is overtaking credibility, research and accuracy. Such an admission by a prominent journalist is a point worth thinking over. A prominent journalist from Reuters also commented in the same programme "Why didn't the people change to BBC World, which was carrying informed, verified and officially confirmed reports and in a non-sensationalistic style of coverage?" This comment sums up the immaturity shown by our TV viewing audience (IBNLIVE, 2008). Is it because viewers wanted to know events at break neck speed?

One thing to take notice is that the English viewing audience is marginal in number compared to the masses that watch Hindi news channels. But the common thread connecting both the language mediums is the prominence given to grabbing eyeballs rather than inspiring thoughts. Television and Newspapers are different in one important aspect. There is a redressal mechanism in place for years in the newspaper medium "Letter to Editor". In the well-known, respected daily like the The Hindu, this channel of communication has been able to bring forward views from readers that show the larger impact of news stories. Such an active feedback mechanism for

discussion is absent in TV Journalism. Such a mechanism will go a long way in taking the discussion on news stories to the next level. The reopening of the Jessica Lal case was one of the exemplary cases when in depth journalism coupled with long lasting public memory ensured justice.

Breaking News: Feeding the Amnesic viewer

TV news channels carry the Breaking News tag with most stories throughout the day. The Headlines are presented in a rolling text form. The Breaking News is presented in bigger fonts and with much more dramatic effects. After the recent media expansion over the internet, TV news channels are starting to change their content in the intense competition. The consumption patterns have changed drastically over the years. Today most urban viewers seem to browse through the headlines and have a glance at whatever stories are breaking at that instant. The Breaking News phenomenon is a direct result of the intense competitive environment to catch eyeballs away from others. No wonder at the same instant, several news channels are soon breaking the same stories. Attempts are made to break different stories but the crisis doesn't get resolved. The mantra is "be the first for Breaking News".

In a worldwide study conducted by Associated Press (AP), several young adults were surveyed by asking them questions pertaining to their news viewing patterns. It came out significantly that many regularly (hourly mostly) checked the news channels to catch up with the Breaking news and not bother to go in depth. Boredom is one major reason among this age group resulting in such a pattern. A bigger concern is the fact that sincere in-depth researched Breaking news is nonexistent, even if the viewer wants to research into the stories. Hence, a fatigue is resulting due to the ever increasing instances of Breaking News in a day.

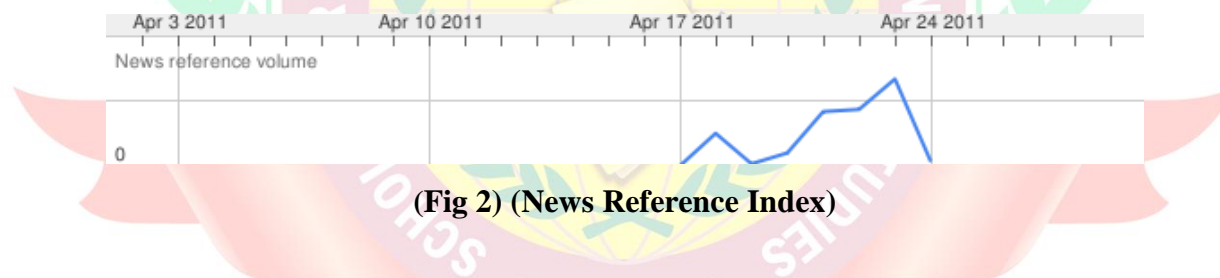
News with Something: Multitasking

Major portion of viewership of news channels, especially English channels, is from urban households. The intake and digestion of news have to be accommodated into their lifestyle. As mentioned earlier, a self-indulgent attitude is not helping the matter. Newspapers have a greater impact since they have a more scheduled reader who takes his time and patience to read the stories and then make opinions. Multitasking during watching news is one major cause for the growth of the Breaking News phenomenon. This attitude has a reciprocating effect as broadcasters put speed and intention to grab attention over depth. In 2009, a group of Stanford researchers had found that People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of

electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time. "Everything distracts them when they're in situations where there are multiple sources of information. They're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their present social context" said Wagner, an associate professor of psychology" (Gorlick, 2009).

The Recall Value

With rising news exposure, the recall value of news items becomes all the more important. The Breaking News ideally should be a tag attached to the most crucial stories of the day. With an apparent overflow of such rushed news, the lack of recall value is a concern. The real impact of news stories is seen when it faces the test of time and discussions. But a Breaking News fails in these terms too. Recently on 17th April 2011, a CD allegedly containing disturbing conversations involving Shanti Bhushan, Amar Singh and Mulayam Singh was sent by an anonymous source to all news channels. Soon Breaking News was released with the details. The resulting news reference volume is shown below.



(Fig 2) (News Reference Index)

The above graph shows the short retention and the subsequent lack of interest in the issue within a week of the Breaking News. The websites of the news channels have an archive but the viewer still refuses to dig deeper into such stories. Similar graphs can be seen in the cases of major short term breaking news stories. TV news broadcast are not able to judge the comparative news value of various such breaking news. Due to such an approach, only the raw facts are dissipated and the recall value goes down drastically.

Politics of It All

As just discussed, this phenomenon of short lived news is used for covert political measures by many. A good example of this was seen during the recent discussion in parliament about the Wikileaks. The opposition leader was addressing the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and it was the question hour in the parliament. The government was about to be cornered on major issues,

including the cash for votes scam. Within minutes of the start of the session, a prominent news channel broadcasted an exclusive Breaking News which presented a Tehelka investigative report about how the sting operation that exposed the Cash for Votes scam in parliament was stage managed by BJP and CNN IBN. The debate in the house was interrupted as a prominent congress leader brought up this report. This brings out certain grave aspects of today's TV journalism. The investigative report is a thoroughly in depth report of how the sting was managed. The fact that BJP had planned it in collusion with the channel has been accepted by those involved. This presents a dirty picture of how TV journalism functions. Looking at the timing of the report as a Breaking News after 2 years of the completion of investigation, one doubts the sincerity and intent. As mentioned, this had a detrimental effect in a powerful debate inside parliament and changed the opinions in a matter of seconds. The Tehelka reporter candidly admitted that to gain the spotlight they plan when to break the news. As mentioned earlier, the comparisons can be drawn at the recent Bhushan CD controversy. The politicians like Amar Singh and Digvijay Singh's frivolous comments were presented throughout the day as Breaking News, threatening to derail the Anti-Corruption mindset of the people. Such news broadcasts not only fail to form opinions and add value to the subject at hand but also confuse the masses. The public needs to assert themselves that these frivolous broadcasts won't be able to affect them. To acknowledge such blatant comments or add any credibility to it will be for the worse.

Conclusion

TV journalism has the power of images to influence opinions. The people trust what they see. As a media aware public, we are facing a transition period. The uncontrolled craving for news coupled with the blindly competitive Breaking News format presents a reporting style devoid of journalistic principles. The lack of media education among the masses leads them to follow the trend and adversely affect the impact of crucial in depth stories. The problems around the world are complex and interconnected. Any effort to be self-indulgent or expecting that only raw exposure can lead to a solution is a grave misjudgment on our part. Credit has to be given to the examples of sincere journalism in the face of market pressure. But the fact that such stories manage the least of retention is worth introspecting.

The public has the right to demand in depth stories, follow ups and debates to the crucial Breaking News but unless it is followed by an assertive intent from the viewers, the cake will be

half baked. It is evident beyond contention that TRPs is one of the top priorities of a 24 hour News channels. Loud conversations, unconfirmed facts, and speculative conclusions are the rising trend. Examples across respected channels like B. B. C. have shown that many immersive and participative shows around world issues and current affairs influence people more than raw Breaking News.

News intake and digestion are not a one off event. A well-researched in depth story presented in an intellectually immersive manner can go a long way in shaping opinions. The masses need to be media literate, at least to some extent in today's age of communication. A redressal mechanism as mentioned earlier is crucial. A strict filtering system in the editorial stage where news items of low or minimal news value are scrutinized will have appositive impact. People still look forward for the morning newspaper to verify stories and read the in depth coverage. There is a clear divide between government sources and secretive media sourced information. As of now, people have a sense of distrust towards official sources and rather digest media sources without questioning. This is one of the most dangerous trends in an established democracy like ours. The Breaking News presentation incorporates over dramatics, shocking graphics to only grab eyeballs, and not the mind. Dynamics of a socially connected world has to be respected. A breaking News is not contained within walls. It spreads like wildfire and if it is raw and not researched, repercussions are huge. Exclusive coverage in a non-sensationalistic manner with a fact based approach coupled with relevant back stories need to be incorporated into a news broadcast.

The paper has made an attempt to analyze the phenomenon that is shaping modern TV journalism. Under market pressure the journalistic intensity and sincerity have taken a dramatic turn. The paper hopes to highlight the impact of such a trend on the society. As viewers we need to introspect how we take in information in the age of speed and whether we study it in depth when required.

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