



All are in the line of fire - and no choices

Economic progress always gets along with it some negatives or after effects which can seldom be corrected. Booming India is the economic story and the news genre on television moving in an inverse way is another. Sadly so. Bossmen at the network call it adaptation with change and seeing the change as a necessity for society's good. For me news has always been sacred since I first compulsorily sampled it at the dinner table with AIR radio reverberating in the background more than three decades ago as a school kid. As we have metamorphosed since then it is imperative that we get a fix on the current traits of the genre on television

Media the Judge: One golden rule of credible journalism is that as a reporter, newsreader or news presenter, you are never supposed to editorialise the story i.e. never give a twist to the story by honing in your viewpoint. We are not entitled to this perquisite but what happens today on television is just that. All newsreaders do give in their bit of what they think is right and this degrades the equity of the channel with the serious viewer and he does not stick anymore. The exit polls are a classical example of a channel demonstrating how they have the pulse of the people. Has a channel ever gone on record to say how wrong they were in their predictions? How many channels will screen the footage of how they predicted the Indian Cricket team would fare in the world cup?

The Big Question we are asking today: It ranges from an item girl to a failed pop singer to a DM who is likely to be transferred. The channel will ask viewers to SMS their views of what they feel is right. The options are only two: If they agree or disagree. There are millions who are suckers to this trap without realizing that it's a revenue stream for the channel as they make money on every SMS sent. The costs for these fixed number SMSs are much more than what it would cost you to send one to your loved ones

Ask questions you have answers to: The Interviewer becomes the Interviewee. Talk shows are a dime a dozen and each one tries to out do the other. The strategy is simple. Ask questions which you have answers to. Then interrupt with some more questions and in the process it's the guest who ends up asking the confusing questions. The foremost being as to why he is there in the first place. The objective is clear as the guest has to be made uncomfortable so that he utters out a couple of sentences which are controversial and these create good copy the next day in the mainline dailies. The number of copies created the next day are the big feathers in the interviewer's cap and this is what he strives for. Here again there is a clear motive, which is, to pick these controversial sound bytes and create a promo for the talk show and air it a thousand times a day to drive appointment viewing. It works brilliantly even if it might sound like crime against humanity

As a result of our report: The eternal dream to be a good social watchdog, so chest beating is in order. Be a humanitarian and work for the general goodness of less privileged. This also has a business angle to it as these scoops are always passed on to the marketing team worth a logic that it will work wonders on the audience shares so it will be wise if they get more advertisers to park moneys on these hot programmes. There are many suckers to this as well and they learn it the hard way as viewership for news in India is still miniscule and news is not brought on numbers but on credibility of content and loyalty of content. Both of which is fast disappearing. Nobody complains.

Only on this channel: This has become a mockery of a line to drive the lack of credibility the channels are driving towards. It is also a sign of the desperate measures that the channel can resort to. There have been instances of the same

celebrity being interviewed on three different channels and being aired at the same time. Each channel doesn't stop from flashing the exclusivity scroll in bold every five seconds.

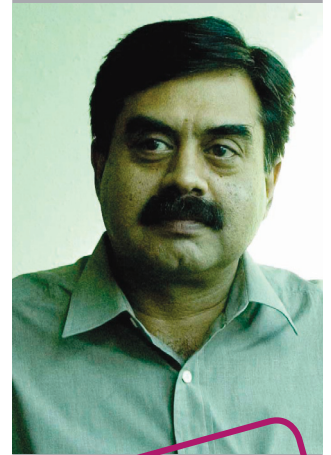
Bigger than the channel: Newsreaders have become household names and they have higher exposure levels in our drawing and bedrooms than even Bollywood superstars. They realize this and behave accordingly too. Thank God they are prohibited from cutting ribbons and endorsing Brands but I wonder why this directive is in place when all the Dont's of yesterday have become Do's of today. I guess it's just a matter of time when we have our favorite brand of toothpaste endorsed by them.

If we can, so can you: The birth of the audience reporter: It defines the dwarfness of all news channels and the expertise it seeks. It started with a social cause but has succumbed to the channels outlook of being in sync with the story focus and hence make it meatier. If someone who has never played the game can express viewpoint on the finer nuances of cricket then the whole world can become a reporter under the garb of the social watchdog. Like the good looking lady, so manicured and pedicured that it seems odd when she bends down and feels the pitch and expresses how the moistness is going to play a crucial role in the end. Audiences who are a bit learned on the game are initially shocked, but over time, shockness has given way to surprise and now hate and detest. The citizen journalist, although in the social watchdog realm, is a nice marketing tactic and works in defining audience loyalty to the core. This is good merchandise for the marketing team to garner sponsorship moneys.

Do they qualify as news channels?: It's tough to define as they have been borrowing from all genres and that is the biggest mistake the channels are making. In the process, they are dying to create news. A pop singer kisses an item girl and a leading news channel does a live interview with both on prime time for 30 minutes on the how, why and now what of the incident. That's not all. Within 10 minutes, there are five more news channels doing the same. News channels have learnt from the soaps and serials that there is merit in not finishing a story but prolonging it everyday. So you will have the Kanchi seer in many episodes, the mega industrial brothers fighting occupying prime time and so on. The recent Bollywood wedding is an example - when nobody is invited but the hidden event gets continuing prominence day after day.

Agility at the cost of Credibility: This is when the viewer surfs like madman. Any important event that credits to be breaking news will have a different rendition. There are animated graphic depictions of how the superstar ran over pedestrians and there will be a count of how many dead and how many injured. The statistics keep on changing and even when it's a matter of life and death.

Where will this all lead to?: News will get further diluted and it will attract more viewers and hence more advertisers will be interested; and that is where the answer to this future will be. Gone are the days when editors were kept on a pedestal and there was a clear divide between the marketing and editorial departments. A head of marketing would never dare to enter the newsroom or chat with the editor. But now, the rule has been turned upside down on its head as editors seek appointments and the marketing department dictates. This is evident from the salaries they draw. News as a business seven years ago generated Rs 20 crores across the country and this year it will clock close to Rs 900 crores. That is reason for the madness to continue and it will. We all will be in the line of fire and we do not have a choice.



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