

Shoddy Journalism [Author: Chetan Kunte]

Appalling journalism. Absolute blasphemy! As I watch the news from home, I am dumbfounded to see Barkha Dutt of NDTV break every rule of ethical journalism in reporting the Mumbai mayhem. Take a couple of instances for example:

* In one instance she asks a husband about his wife being stuck, or held as a hostage. The poor guy adds in the end about where she was last hiding. Aired! My dear friends with AK-47s, our national news is helping you. Go get those still in. And be sure to thank NDTV for not censoring this bit of information.

* In another instance, a General sort of suggests that there were no hostages in Oberoi Trident. (Clever.) Then, our heroine of revelations calls the head of Oberoi, and the idiot confirms a possibility of 100 or more people still in the building. Hello! Guys with guns, you've got more goats to slay. But before you do, you've got to love NDTV and more precisely Ms. Dutt. She's your official intelligence from Ground zero.

You do not need to be a journalist to understand the basic premise of ethics, which starts with protecting victims first; and that is done by avoiding key information from being aired publicly—such as but not limited to revealing the number of possible people still in, the hideouts of hostages and people stuck in buildings.

Imagine you're one of those sorry souls holed-up in one of those bathrooms, or kitchens. A journalist pulls your kin outside and asks about your last contact on national television, and other prying details. In a bout of emotion, if they happen to reveal more details, you are sure going to hell. Remember these are hotels, where in all likelihood, every room has a television. All a terrorist needs to do is listen to Ms. Barkha Dutt's latest achievement of extracting information from your relative, based on your last phone-call or SMS. And you're shafted—courtesy NDTV.

If the terrorists don't manage to shove you in to your private hell, the journalists on national television will certainly help you get there. One of the criticisms about Barkha Dutt on Wikipedia reads thus:

During the Kargil conflict, Indian Army sources repeatedly complained to her channel that she was giving away locations in her broadcasts, thus causing Indian casualties.

Looks like the idiot journalist has not learnt anything since then. I join a number of bloggers pleading her to shut the f... up.

Update: In fact, I am willing to believe that Hemant Karkare died because these channels showed him prepare (wear helmet, wear bullet-proof vest.) in excruciating detail live on television. And they in turn targeted him where he was unprotected. The brave officer succumbed to bullets in the neck.

Update 2 [28.Nov.2300hrs]: Better sense appears to have prevailed in the latter half of today—either willfully, or by Government coercion², and Live broadcasts are now being limited to non-action zones. Telecast of action troops and strategy is now not being aired live. Thank goodness for that.

Update 3 [30.Nov.1900hrs]: DNA India reports about a UK couple ask media to report carefully:

The terrorists were watching CNN and they came down from where they were in a lift after hearing about us on TV.

— Lynne Shaw in an interview.

1. Oh, they have a lame excuse pronouncing that the television connections in the hotel has been cut, and therefore it is okay to broadcast. Like hell!

2. I'm thinking coercion, since Government has just denied renewing CNN's rights to air video today; must've have surely worked as a rude warning to the Indian domestic channels.

Instead of apologizing, and introspecting on how to improve, this is the kind of crap we get in response to shoddy journalism.

Radhika Sahasranaman rips the guts of that response on a 3000 strong, and growing Facebook group, whose title couldn't have sent signals any clearer:

NDTV's response is in itself a giveaway of misplaced notions: "In the absence of any instructions on site and in the absence of any such framework we broke NO rules" ("convenient transference of responsibility" or what?); and the entire argument, she concludes, amounts to "which television journalist tops the charts or falls to the bottom" (is that how they keep score?). It is important that we don't shoot the messenger but when the messenger loses the message, there is something to be done. Which is why, for once, I will take Barkha's advice. Use the remote control when emote control doesn't work - Radhika Sahasranaman

Do read her entire post. (Sign-up on Facebook just to read this—if nothing; I guarantee it's worth it.) She conveys it with such clarity, that I kept reading it over and over.

Here's another:

TV news would no doubt argue that most other critiques of 26/11 coverage have been answered, too. Shoving mikes in front of distressed people? They wanted to share. Too close to the theatre of operation? If someone told us we would have moved away. And just in case anyone still has doubts, Narayana Murthy and Suketu Mehta, among many others, rated 26/11 coverage as first class.

Maybe the Government goofed up not laying down rules of coverage. Does that end all questions on journalistic responsibility? Think about it. If journalists, especially senior editors, say they need the government to tell them how to do their business, they are opening a door many politicians would love to never shut again.

— Saubhik Chakrabarti on Indian Express

The choice could not have been simpler: you either kick the idiocy, and if that does not work, then kick the idiot out.

Update: Oh, by the way, there is a framework (Self-Regulation Guidelines for the Broadcasting Sector [pdf]) for anyone who cares—and has been in existence for more than a year.

Update 2: NSG says media got in the way, wants guidelines.

Update 3: Presstalk: In the name of fair and balanced.

Update 4: The Hoot: "Those who argue that viewers can use the remote to not watch what they find unethical or irresponsible should note that many in India did, people went to offices and went to vote but the TV all the same managed to give important information to the backers of the terrorists who were glued to their screens. The remote is not the solution to such irresponsibility."

Harini Calamur: "Week 1 - Post 26/11 - Quo Vadis News Media?"