**[Crisis in journalism](https://www.dawn.com/news/1686892/crisis-in-journalism)**

[Arifa Noor](https://www.dawn.com/authors/57/arifa-noor)Published April 26, 2022

The writer is a journalist.

TELEVISION doesn’t get an Eid break, so those of us who make a living from this medium are more than familiar with the idea of an Eid show. As Ramazan enters its last week and the pious retreat to mosques or secluded corners of their homes to pray, TV wallahs enter a hectic race to record shows in advance in order to get some days off for Eid — with the consent of the employers. It’s a frenzy of recordings and a race to find topics that are zara hat ke, (something different) and guests who may or may not be hat ke.

However, once in a while, there is not just a rainbow but also a pot of gold at the end of it when a recording provides food for thought and more. Thus it was for me during one such show with Rana Jawad of Geo and Fahd Husain of the ‘Red Zone Files’ and Dawn fame, who joined us for an episode on the changing media environment.

As we were trying to wade through terms such as ‘journalism’, ‘print’, ‘electronic’ and ‘social media’, Fahd Husain announced that he had a confession to make, and then told us about his recent decision to stop subscribing to the print edition of newspapers and forcing himself to read the news on his phone every morning. In a group of three journalists, who had started their careers long ago at a time when newspapers were the only altar before which journalists prostrated themselves, he did manage to scandalise us a bit. How was he coping, we gasped, as if asking a smoker who had quit cold turkey. For what is a morning where the cuppa is not sipped while the fingers get tainted by newspaper ink?

He conceded that it was a struggle, though there were advantages as well. As he was not wading through newspaper pages (with relevant and irrelevant stories), he was able to focus on what interested him and hence was getting through far more content. As we focused on the changes taking place as consumers as well as producers of news, the conversation moved on to content and more.

The quality of the news and other content being produced has been steadily declining.

Rana Jawad, old school despite riding the television wave, was firm in his belief that whatever the platform and pattern of consumption — be it a hard copy of a newspaper or a phone or an iPad — the reader and the viewer will always be interested in ‘news’. The hunger for the news story will not die, he argued. He pointed to the success that the Western legacy media has gained in the digital world by racking up digital subscriptions after struggling initially.

But it was inevitable to ask at this stage if the news in Pakistan — be it newspapers or channels or websites — could afford to go behind a firewall and push for a digital subscription base. The answer from Fahd Husain was a resounding no. The content just wasn’t worth paying for, he said.

This perhaps is the most serious challenge confronting the industry. The quality of the news and other content being produced has been on a steady decline — the newspapers’ front pages offer a summary of the 9 pm bulletin of the channels from the night before. And the news bulletins tend to offer a steady diet of ‘he said’, ‘he countered and ‘she said’. On average, the first 20 minutes of what is an hour-long bulletin comprise the ‘headlines’, the bulk of which are about which politician or government official said what. And the entire evening fare, for about five hours, is the same set of politicians saying the same thing in a studio, in front of a TV host.

From covering events, we have moved on to covering statements while the rest of the world has been grappling with multimedia platforms, different ways of telling stories and figuring out the balance between news and analysis.

Consider the front page of the New York Times, which is delivered to a few homes in Pakistan courtesy the Express Tribune. The front page has an op-ed on the left hand, a news analysis on the right, while the story in the middle of these two is usually a human interest piece pegged on a current event, and the piece below it all is mostly a feature. All of them are what in journalistic lingo are called exclusive stories, though one can debate their quality and interest to individual readers. News websites are diversifying even further with podcasts, videos, graphics and so on. But at home, the past few years have seen a trend in reverse — content has shrunk in quantity as well as quality, reporting has deteriorated, and there is little diversity and no innovation. Some of it can be blamed on state censorship or financial problems, but not entirely.

The financial model, frankly, is partly to be blamed also, which has been mentioned before more than once. The way the private media functions in Pakistan, it appears that financial well-being is not linked to audience or reader numbers — if it was, then a crisis would lead to innovation, as it did in the case of the West, where the social media revolution forced the legacy media to invest heavily in their digital platforms and multimedia storytelling.

Investments are made to reap rewards. In our little part of the pond, we are waiting for the money to pour in before we improve content. And in the meantime, it seems there is no innovation or effort put into traditional platforms or new ones. Resources have shrunk, as has the content, while websites continue to be dominated by ‘traditional’, breaking news stories.

Is this because in our industry there is no strong link between readership/viewership and revenue? Sometimes, this is what it appears to be. And this perhaps is also the reason why the traditional media is disconnected from the younger demographic, which is getting its news from elsewhere. The disconnect is far more complex than we, in the media industry, are able to grasp.

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*Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2022*