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Breaking News and News Alert, between Information and Spectacle for Rating

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Abstract

We live in a digital era, a period when information travels with fulminant speed and goes from one side of the world to the other in only a few minutes. The general interest information has a strong impact on the mankind and is transmitted rapidly especially through the internet and through news televisions, which take over the information directly from the area where the event occurs or by the intermediary of other media channels, such as news agencies or other TV stations. Therefore, it is extremely important for the journalists to grant a particular importance to the research of a piece of news before broadcasting it as news alert or breaking news and to analyze the impact that the information has on the audience. This because, at present, we reached the situation of creating 10-12 breaking news per day, fact that leads to a decline in journalists' credibility and it can cast ridicule on the journalist concepts of breaking news or news alert.

Keywords: TV News, tabloidization, information, credibility

JEL classification: A10, H10, O10

1 Introductory considerations

According to BBC's editorial guideline, one of the international reference televisions, the fundamental concept of breaking news can be defined as the "interruption of the broadcasting with unusual, totally unexpected events", (bbc.com/ editorial guideline breaking news). Recent information is not necessarily breaking news information. We consider that any recent piece of news that implies a certain interest should be broadcasted quickly, but it enters the breaking news initiation procedure only if it cumulatively complies with several conditions:

1. it is extraordinary information
2. it is unique
3. it is an absolute novelty
4. it is of general interest
5. it has a major impact.

The Editorial Guideline of the TV station Digi24 gives some examples of potential breaking news subjects, and among these are the following "resignation/accident of the President, Prime Minister; earthquake with victims in Romania, not in Guatemala or even in Bulgaria; the decease of a former president, of a personality, but not the hospital admission/medical intervention of such a person; the crash of a commercial bank in Romania, but not a record depreciation of the national currency in relation to the euro currency" (Digi24 Editorial Guideline). In addition, the magnitude of breaking news depends on the value of the information in itself (MOJO: The Mobile Journalism Handbook, p. 56). Practically, in television, the breaking news procedure entry represents the total renunciation to the scheduled program, and the entire news room must focus on and get involved in the gathering of as much new information as possible able to support the respective story and to maintain it on air as long as possible, even for a few hours. The subject must be so important and so well editorially supported in order to create the sensation of a completely extraordinary event for the viewer, event that is worth interrupting any activity to watch the television. In our opinion, breaking news should take place only in a special context, thus, a delusion of the viewer through several breaking news broadcasts per day has as result casting ridicule on this format and the lost of interest from the public.

In the specialty literature, the concept of news alert was not debated too much. In Romania, the procedure started to be used since 2008 by the TV stations Realitatea TV and Antena 3. Practically, the news that are important, new, with a major impact, which do not imply an exceptional character and, thus, cannot be classified in the breaking news procedure can be developed in a news alert regime. This means the broadcast of the piece of news as soon as it is verified sufficiently (at least 2 sources or an official channel); the discussion on the subject for 5 - 10 minutes, with telephone or video reactions, and afterwards returning to the normal news program; subsequently, punctually intervening during the broadcast with updates, eventually with images from the scene. In the evening, the piece of news is commented upon in a contextualized manner in a talk show, with guests on set. The second day implies the elaboration of follow-ups.

Case study: The President refuses to appoint a senator at the head of the Ministry of Transport

The piece of news that the Romanian President refused to appoint a senator at the head of the Ministry of Transport is not extraordinary, it does not have an exceptional character and it is not unexpected in the conditions in which the senator did not have an ample CV in the field of Transport. It is, nevertheless, important and relevant information in the present political context. Therefore, it would have been ideal to announce it in a news alert regime, namely to discuss on it for approximately 10 minutes, to sustain it with telephone calls or live transmissions and reactions from politicians. Afterwards, returning to the initial program. However, this subject was treated in a news alert regime only on the news channel Digi 24, the rest of the channels resorting to the variant of breaking news. We consider that such a decision is not opportune, in the context in which the information does not comply with the theoretical principles of breaking news procedure initiation. In such a situation, it is possible to go back to the same subject, still in a news alert regime, during the entire day every time it is necessary. Just as it happened. All these are punctual interventions that add value and relevance to the initial piece of news, but are not related between them with long discussions and comments of the type „opinion offering”. No emergency guests are invited, except, at most, for the journalists in the field of transport. The moment of debate and analysis is developed during the evening talk show. Here take place the implication evaluation, the setting of facts and predictions in the context. (Digi24 Editorial Guide)

2 Breaking news and tabloidization

As mentioned before, the breaking-news entry procedure should comply with certain principles, and in their absence, another method for information broadcasting should be adopted. In Romania, because of the large number of television stations, the battle for audience is fierce, and therefore, in their “rush” for rating, certain TV stations reached to broadcast breaking news stories up to 10-12 times per day, fact that casts ridicule on this concept. For example, the news channel Romania TV went on breaking news because Elena Udrea had been seen at lunch with her boyfriend, fact that, in our opinion, violates the conceptual regulations. At the opposite pole, Digi 24 channel considered that such information did not represent any news, and, as a result, this piece of news was not even broadcasted in its news blocks. Therefore, everything depends on each channel’s policy and editorial guideline, but it is not recommended to perform breaking news on any new subject such as the health condition of a singer or how a director’s fortune is distributed after his death. All these started from the fact that the mundane news attract a numerous public, bring high ratings, and, as a result, the principles are set aside. Besides, at Realitatea TV, in 2011, when the channel’s helicopter was lifted in the air to follow a billionaire’s wife while she was heading towards her husband’s house accompanied by an officer of the court in order to take her daughter, the channel had the highest ratings in its history.

However, sometimes, certain televisions turn their attention towards mundane characters and even adopt the variant of breaking news to broadcast information precisely in order to attract the public opinion’s attention from other subjects. For example, the televisions owned by various politicians have the interest of attracting people’s attention from the problems occurring in a certain political party, problems such as corruption, scandals with salary reductions, arrests, etc. and therefore, they bring a mundane scandal before the public opinion, scandal that they develop by supporting the breaking news procedure for a very long time and continuing it during several days with guests able to bring details to the subject.

In our opinion, the breaking news in case of mundane subjects should not exist, or, perhaps, only in absolutely exceptional cases such as, for example,

Michael Jackson's death, an artist with tens of millions of fans in the entire world. But breaking news that a billionaire's wife makes a scene does not seem justified, clearly casts ridicule on the concept of breaking news and determines the quality public to change the channel and not to react to any subsequent breaking news, even justified by its conceptual nature, because they are already sick off worthless subjects.

3 Breaking news and parallel investigations

Over the past few years, 6 news televisions have functioned in the present media environment. The competition is fierce, and because of the desire to reach higher ratings, televisions came to enter the breaking news procedure even following the revelations made after journalist investigations. Thus, if documents or films unrevealed by the respective moment are presented during debates or talk shows, the channel enters immediately in breaking news procedure. Sometimes, after the journalist investigations, the institutions of the state took legal action *ex officio* and even criminal prosecution was instituted against certain persons after the disclosures in the TV shows. Nevertheless, the question is if breaking news in such a situation is justifiable. The answer cannot be categorical, and this because, in an exceptional way, breaking news could be initiated. For example, if a video in which the president or the prime minister were filmed while receiving bribery or influence peddling, serious actions by nature, was broadcasted, we consider that the interest in taking the decision of initiating breaking news would be justified.

We believe that breaking news could be initiated only in exceptional situations following parallel investigations. For example, Antena 3 entered the breaking news procedure after broadcasting some videos about the brother of the president in function in 2014, while he was accepting money for influence peddling, and from the videos, it came out that part of the respective amount of money had reached even the president. We consider that editors' decision in such a situation was justified, because it concerned a piece of news about the first man in the state, it had an exceptional nature, with a major impact, the decision being justified by the general interest.

We cannot say the same thing about other news stations that announce breaking news because they present in their broadcast documents specifying that certain persons in the political sphere do business with the state, obtain commissions to assign works or try to influence the justice. Even if the subjects are by their nature of general interest, they should remain on the level of information

presented during broadcasts. In order to outline the disclosures made after parallel journalist investigations, news can be subsequently created to be broadcasted in the news blocks when such information will be resumed. It is not normal that the television stations initiate the breaking news procedure only because a prime time broadcast starts, broadcast which discusses issues even of general interest such as the adoption of the Law regarding the unique pay or the modification of the Criminal Code. These should remain at the stage of information presented during broadcasts, without using the breaking news yellow strip.

4 Breaking News and messages desynchronization

Certain news televisions in Romania approached the breaking news procedure from a different perspective. Thus, they go in breaking news, but they do not interrupt the scheduled program. This happens by using girdles and flippers to transmit messages but the content of the news blocks or shows follow the regular schedule. Thus, it came to a desynchronization of the messages shown on TV, because we can see for example a piece of news regarding the depreciation of the national currency, but the yellow girdle announces that the Government will increase the salaries. We consider that this new approached procedure destroys the concept of breaking news, the concept of exceptional event for which the “broadcast is interrupted”, precisely for its complete importance. This sort of approach has the purpose of attracting audience, of letting the public wait until the proper presentation of the breaking news information. This approach is also practiced in the case of the news alert procedure, the effects on the public being the same. We consider that in totally exceptional situations, after entering the breaking news procedure and after finishing it, a girdle or a flipper could be maintained to announce on a differently colored background, yellow or red, according to each TV station, breaking news information, even if the program continues as scheduled with other information. This has as purpose to announce the viewer that a major, exceptional event occurred, event that he can watch during the next news block, and therefore, the presence of the girdle or flipper is justified.

5 Breaking news and political speech

Certain news televisions in Romania came with a new approach for the concept of breaking news, namely, during politicians’ speeches, in press

conferences or party meetings, and thus, they initiate breaking news when the President of the country, the Prime Minister or the president of a party speaks. However, is this event so important for the televisions to enter the breaking news procedure? Sometimes it is, but most of the times the “breaking” of the usual program in order to present such an event is not justified. Certainly, a President’s speech should be mediatized, and news televisions having as main function to inform the public must transmit the event live, for the statements to reach the public as soon as possible, but in our opinion, the entry in breaking news procedure cannot be justified without a “bomb” statement, a statement out of the ordinary. For example, a statement concerning issues related to state and state president’s security, a statement concerning his potential resignation or concerning Romania’s entry into the Schengen area, can be subjects that should be presented with special graphics. Nevertheless, it is preferable not to initiate breaking news only because the president of the country promotes a press conference, for example, in order to attack his political adversaries or to reply to other political persons. We consider that this approach is unjustified, because it does not imply an exceptional nature. It is a normal subject, that can be broadcasted live, with no special procedures, and, subsequently, it can be debated during the political shows or news can be created following the political speech. Eventually, if the statement is important, if he solicits the Prime Minister’s resignation, the news alert can be initiated, but the procedure starts after the president affirms the declarations, and not before. If there is information “on the sources” that the president intends to affirm such a declaration, the procedure can be initiated in advance, in the sense that it can be prepared, for the TV station to enter the information as soon as possible. The initiation of news alert or breaking news before the political speech should be avoided because there is a risk for the respective person to change his mind and the TV channel to loose credibility before the viewers.

In addition, most of the news televisions in Romania choose to initiate breaking news for any political events, for the elections within a party, for the press conferences promoted by political leaders or simply for local events to which important political leaders take part. This decision should be made according to the potential of the news to bring high ratings or according to the interests of the station’s “shadow” owners. We consider that this approach violates the concept of breaking news, and with time, the TV station risks to loose gradually its audience, because the multitude of events presented in the breaking news procedure lead to

a lack of interest from the public who gets tired of seeing worthless events promoted excessively, to a high intensity.

6 Ethics and deontology in the breaking news and news alert procedure

According to art. 3 of the European Council's Resolution 1003/93 having regard to the Journalism Ethics, "the basic principle of journalism ethics is the differentiation between news and opinions, so that these are not confounded. The piece of news is information regarding facts and data, while opinions include the press agents', editors' and journalists' thoughts, ideas or judgments". Therefore, starting from this principle, we can say, with no fear of being wrong, that in the breaking news procedure initiation the host, the editor and the producer should be careful in making the difference between the opinions of a person concerning an event and the event in itself, because the broadcast of a piece of news should be based on the truth, that can be ensured "by adequate verification and demonstration means and on impartiality in presentation, description and narration" (art. 3 of the Resolution 1003/ 93). However, there are also moments when persons in key positions hide the truth on the idea that it is a State secret. (Negrea, 2015). Then, journalists must procure information paying increased attention to the source because, without an official confirmation, there is a risk to present the truth in a truncated manner.

Gossips, information on sources should not be assimilated to the truth or confused with it. Therefore, the accuracy of truth presentation is one of the issues that should be taken into consideration in the breaking news procedure, and it can be obtained not only by presenting an event, but also by searching the important aspect behind a news story, by avoiding preconceptions, confusions, in order to finally discover the truth (BBC Editorial Guidelines).

Integrity and editorial independence must be kept before any external interests, any political or commercial pressures and any personal interests (Realitatea tv Guidelines). Moreover, the rating of a television depends also on public trust, and therefore this value must be kept as a landmark and it can be won by objectivity, honesty, by guaranteeing that no manipulation is attempted by any kind of means.

According to the Resolution COE 1003/93 “information should not be treated as merchandise, but as a necessary to satisfy a fundamental right of the citizen”. It is about the right to information, therefore the quality or content of the news should not be altered in order to manipulate or obtain material benefits, but the news should be broadcasted in such a way to guarantee the citizen’s right to information. Therefore, the television channels’ incomes should come from the fact that they have high ratings because of the quality of the presented information (Resolution COE 1003/93).

Nevertheless, during the breaking news procedure, most of the times, not only information as such is presented, but it is also interpreted and commented by specialists, journalists, political analysts, according to the event for which the usual program is interrupted. In the context in which information is supplied rapidly, the viewer no longer has the possibility to discern, to arrange the news in relation to his existence, feeling the need of an analysis, of a comment issued by an authorized person (TV host, producer, guest), to clarify not only what it can be seen on TV but also the reason why it happened, to have the ability of transferring his attention from the media phenomenon to the meaning of the occurred event. There is a danger that, because of the enormous volume of information in a short time and with superior promptness, the public seek the interpretations of the news transmitted by broadcasting, in the written media. This is the reason for which the function of interpretation has a particular value. Thus, the audiovisual means use during the breaking news procedure a sort of dialogue with the receptors, allot time for open or masked comments, within which – as in chronicles, analyses or research – a presentation which is short, concise, simple, correctly formulated, coherent and accessible, with no hesitations, in the medium-standard language, allowing the channel to determine a familiar relation with its general audience. A judicious analysis is intended, analysis during which questions are asked and answers are commented upon, the time for addressing opinions is distributed, explanations are required from the persons involved, an individualized contact is established with the viewers, debates are initiated and conclusions are formulated, everything appearing under the form of conversational broadcasts, located at the border between information and comment.

Moreover, it should provide protection to the victims of sexual aggressions, especially in the context in which this aspect is not sufficiently regulated on a national and European level (Voinea, 2015). Also, during breaking

news the journalists take responsibility for the citizens by the fact that they should avoid shocking the public moral consciousness, they should protect the human fundamental rights.

7 Conclusions

The most important news televisions in the world, CNN, BBC, Euronews or CBS give a particular attention to the breaking news and news alert procedure. They keep a decent line and they do not deviate from the basic journalist concepts and rules in order to attract high ratings. This is why they kept their credibility ever since they were created, they are real landmarks in the field and no one is afraid when taking over information in case of a world scale event. Unfortunately, this line is not kept in Romanian by all news televisions, and not infrequently, some of them give up the conceptual directions in order to attract audience. This is how certain news channels get to announce 10-12 breaking news procedures per day and the same number of news alerts only to gain rating. This approach can function for the moment, but in time, it can lead to a decline of the channel's general audience because it may lose credibility in case it initiates breaking news procedure on a mundane piece of news or because two politicians entered in polemics. Also, during breaking news or news alert, televisions should have editorial guidelines adequately elaborated which should include all the aspects that may be found when exceptional information occur, so that editors and producers know exactly what decision to make in order to comply with the fundamental principles of human rights, with the legislation in the field but also with the basic journalist concepts. Giving a special attention to media subjects, news televisions can attract rating by proving credibility, impartiality, and respect for the viewer, offering real information in a fast way and without exaggerating in the broadcast of sensational information. Certain televisions, few in fact, managed to keep this editorial line, and demonstrated that in time, even if they did not have a spectacular audience, they implied a constant rating increase, succeeding in the creation of a credible channel image.

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