

The New Wild West

Originally Published in Dawn, 29 June 2021.

Arifa Noor
Journalist

It's now universally acknowledged in casual conversations that fewer people are watching news channels. Each time I am forced to tell someone new I meet what I do for a living, they confess (sometimes nonchalantly and sometimes self-consciously) their lack of interest in news channels. Anecdotally, this appears to be a sea change from, say, 2007, when everyone was glued to the television screens, as Pakistan went through one of its most tumultuous years. If the conversation continues for a bit, many even go so far as to explain they don't read newspaper either. News is now delivered to them from their smartphones — it's where they find out about breaking news, where they read analyses and even see the viral clips from talk shows or parliament which are the talk of the town.

It is now not unusual to come across journalists who are willing to admit they don't read newspapers every morning! (My skin crawls when I hear this.) Clearly, technology is changing our lives for sure but also journalism, and the way journalists behave.

But bad habits are not all the digital revolution has allowed us to acquire. Like the Wild West, cyberspace has also allowed many to dream (and sometimes big). Young reporters have quit their jobs at news channels and turned their YouTubing into a steady source of income — the prime minister has even interacted with them, something which was once only a privilege reserved for newspaper correspondents or television stars. It is worth wondering if other political parties follow suit.

Some of the bigger, established, and enterprising, names from television have also turned to social media for a sideshow on YouTube, which must be doing well, as they continue to pour in the effort and time.

But cyberspace talks or discussions are also now proliferating, far beyond physical studios. Websites, individuals, think tanks — encouraged by the distancing set in place by Covid-19 — have all taken to the format once seen as the domain of news channels. Sometimes, this allows discussions on taboo subjects not allowed on mainstream; sometimes it allows ‘taboo’ people to discuss politics or interview politicians; and occasionally, it has led to discussions which then made their way to the mainstream — the spirited debate between Mariam Chughtai and Pervez Hoodbhoy on the Single National Curriculum first took place online before it was then replicated on mainstream channels.

But how much has this impacted news channels? It is hard to say for accurate information about viewers and advertising is hard to come by in Pakistan. Anecdotally, the reach and influence of mainstream news outlets — be they newspapers or channels — has been impacted greatly but who knows what this means in real terms.

However, the adventures in the digital Wild West in Pakistan have led to many YouTube pundits but few website ventures. This is intriguing to say the least. For the experience elsewhere has been a bit different. In the US, when newspapers were first impacted by the digital world, websites such as Huffington Post and BuzzFeed were the talk of the town. Next door, in India, websites such as ThePrint, Scroll and TheWire have acquired a name as well as a reputation. Many of the big names from the days of print are now found on these websites.

At home, we do have a few examples of news websites but with fewer financial resources than what appears to have gone into their Indian counterparts. So far, it seems that digital websites are not attracting the kind of investment which is still pouring into television channels — just this week, everyone has been talking of the sale of one of the biggest news channels of the country.

Perhaps this will change in the coming days because India usually is ahead of Pakistan

in terms of changing trends. I remember by 2000 news channels were proliferating in India (Barkha Dutt was already a household name by then), two years before Geo came on air, revolutionising the news landscape in Pakistan. It interests people such as myself because the proliferating YouTube channels have only further blurred the line between news and opinion. Twitter, talk shows, blogs and now YouTube have made it harder for the older, more traditional outlets to ensure editorial checks and inform readers and viewers about opinion versus fact. For example, talk shows often begin with counsel about the difference between opinion and fact but participants routinely offer a mix of the two. ‘Khabars’ are offered during the discussion and no one is in a position to ask if it has been vetted or double-checked. One-man YouTube channels don’t have the luxury of editorial checks. Journalism used to be about individual as well as institutional credibility but in the modern day, only the former seems to be of importance. In the digital Wild West, the celebrity journalist on YouTube and Twitter, is now the Frontier Hero, the stuff of legends.

But it may not last, partly, because regulations are inevitable, though it’s hard to say what shape they will take. The efforts are ongoing in most countries in the West. For example, the UK introduced an online safety bill in parliament just last month, which was criticised by rights activists. Germany is reviewing a law passed two years ago. Australia passed a law earlier this year which will compel social media giants such as Google and Facebook to pay news outlets for using their content; it’s the first law of its kind and is being seen as a harbinger for what may follow in other countries. All these are pieces of a bigger puzzle, which will fit together to introduce rules to a largely unregulated space.

In the developing world, these regulations will not be entirely consensus-based or for the greater good, unfortunately.

But the changing face of journalism will eventually be influenced by (and even influence) these regulations. Whether these will strengthen institutional journalism or lead to more proliferation of individual efforts is hard to tell. But the Wild West can’t last forever.