

TOP NEWS MANAGERS AGREE ON TV COVERAGE GUIDELINES

ISLAMABAD - Top news managers from Pakistan's eight television channels have evolved a first-of-its-kind voluntary framework to standardize professional guidelines governing terrorism coverage.

Representatives of KTN, Samaa, DawnNews, Dunya, Express News & Express 24/7, ARY, Geo and Aaj television met in Karachi this weekend to successfully conclude a two-week long internal debate on how best to respond to viewer feedback on reporting incidents where large scale loss of human life has occurred. The group, comprising key news decision-makers in their respective organisations, recognized that the public's abiding trust in the media placed a heavy responsibility on news-managers to further improve the quality of news product.

Applying their collective experience and judgment, they agreed on harmonizing existing professional methods to perform the task of honest reporting in these times of extreme crisis and national danger.

Members of the group, a voluntary gathering open to all, agreed among themselves that formalization of policies on reporting and news gathering in terrorism-related cases was needed.

The areas where the agreement was reached pertained to field and live reporting, viewer exposure to extreme and disturbing visuals, dead bodies, badly injured people, accounts of the emotionally-distraught as well as eye-witnesses, and real-time decisions on releasing information during war or in the case of hostage-situation.

The news managers decided that they will desist from showing graphic and disturbing images on the screen, and as and when required, utilize a delay mechanism in their transmissions. This will enable the channels to edit out undesirable footage. The news managers also developed a consensus on putting greater efforts to check information before flashing breaking news about bomb blasts etc.

The news managers also agreed to exercise extreme caution when covering incidents involving hostages. They decided that in such situations they will take all steps necessary to ensure that information being relayed through the channels does not, in any way, help the hostage-takers.

Better training for camera crew, safety orientation of reporters were other areas where the group agreed to implement swift measures in line with the potential and constraints of each channel. They also agreed to introduce strict safety measures for their crews covering disaster situations.

They also requested all TV channels to cooperate with them in following these voluntary guidelines, and welcomed suggestions to further improve their coverage.

The news managers agreed among themselves that more discussions of this sort with their colleagues from other channels were required to further elaborate this framework. Through such discussions, Pakistan's news channels would be able to honour the faith hundreds of millions of viewers have reposed in them, and who look up the Pakistani media as the most trustworthy institution central to the struggle for a better, prosperous, democratic and secure Pakistan.

The news managers reiterated that these voluntary guidelines drafted by them would further enhance the professionalism of Pakistani channels. They resolved to implement these decisions to the best of their abilities. The Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) has already given its voluntary Code of Conduct on coverage of terrorism to the government. Now since the news managers have also agreed to voluntarily follow their own set of guidelines, they called upon the government to desist from imposing any guidelines formulated by official functionaries, as such guidelines would be seen as restrictions that would run counter to the spirit of freedom of expression. They also called upon the government and the military to stop pulling channels off-air as such moves are counter-productive.

The top news managers also decided to hold such meetings on a regular basis with the aim to review such matters, and improve and revise these guidelines if and when the need is felt.

The news managers who formulated these guidelines included the following:
Azhar Abbas (Managing Director, Geo News); Syed Talat Hussain (Executive Director Aaj News); Abbas Nasir (Editor, DawnNews & Dawn); Ali Qazi (CEO, KTN); Tariq Wasi (Head of Operations, ARY Digital Network); Mohsin Raza (Director News ARY News); Fahd Husain (Director News, Express News & Express 24/7); Owais Tohid (Director News, Dunya TV); Nasim Zehra (Director Current Affairs, Dunya TV); Amir Zia (Director Current Affairs, Samaa TV)

(Ends)