

# Ethical Issues of Crisis Reporting in Pakistani Media

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### Abstract

This study is based on the qualitative content analysis of three private televisions news “GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA NEWS” to explore ethical issues such as irresponsible reporting, unauthentic information and sensationalism in live reporting of crisis. The main purpose of this study is to know whether or not television news channels violate ethics in live reporting of crisis. All national and international bodies of journalism said that media must follow media ethics for the general interest of society as no society afford free and irresponsible media. Data in form of different news reports of GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA televisions has been collected carefully and analyzed. For the purpose of this study three incidents i.e Bhoja airplane crash, Jinnah Avenue incident and Wagah border Lahore blast have been selected to explore ethical issues in live coverage of crisis. It has been observed that private television channels violate media ethics in live coverage of crisis due to many factors like competitive nature of the market, less control of editorial policy, lack of training and awareness. The study suggests that all stakeholders including media houses, authorities and civil society should form a comprehensive code of conduct to ensure implementation of media ethics for the general interest of society.

*Keywords:* Media, Ethics, Crisis, Pakistan, Media,

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### Introduction

Media is considered as the eyes and ears of a society and it is considered the fourth pillar of the state. According to a report published by Inter-news in 2005, correct information is necessary especially in crisis to enable the victims to assess actual situation to secure their lives. Pakistan inherited newspapers and radio after independence but, at that time the country had a few newspapers like Pakistan Times, Dawn, Zamindar, Nawa-e-Waqat, Shahbaz, Jang, Inqalab and Unjam, while having three radio stations including Lahore, Peshawar and Dhaka. According to official website of Pakistan Television (PTV), the medium of television was brought in 1964 and first news on state run television was broadcast on 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1964. Currently over 90 private television channels, 300 newspapers and over 115 commercial FM radio stations are working in the country. The word ethic was derived from Greek term ethos, means way of acting mostly deals with right and wrong actions of human being in certain conditions. Different theories like Virtue, Stoicism, Hedonism, Utilitarianism and Deontology had emerged about ethics. Aristotle thought that tactical reasons or wisdom must be exercised in individual daily life (Raza A. M., 2013). In initial stage, the press was under control of state, in second stage it gained power to work as fourth pillar of the state, in third stage served as a protector of public liberty and finally assumed the status to perform social responsible role in the society. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) code of conduct says that no program shall be on aired which contains content to provoke violence, or against maintenance of law and order, or promotes anti-national behavior or which glorify crime or criminals (Ward, 2008) . It has been debating that electronic media often violate ethics in live reporting of crisis. Therefore, the aim of the study is to find out ethical issues in television live reporting of crisis.

**Objectives**

The objectives of the study are:

- To know do private televisions act in an irresponsible manner in live reporting of crisis.
- To know do private televisions report unauthentic information in live reporting of crisis.
- To know do private televisions sensationalize news in live reporting of crisis.

**Literature review**

Academia and media practitioners have been discussing violations of media ethics especially in television live coverage of crisis. The history of live coverage of television could be traced in the United States, New York at World's Fair in 1939 as National Broadcasting Company (NBC) covered the speech of the then US President Roosevelt live at New York World's Fair ceremony (Herbert, 2004). Oregon Council of Police Association in the United States backed a decision of the State Legislature to empower police commander to stop media from live reporting in hostage incidents (Tuggle H. S., 2001). Media should fulfill its ethical responsibilities in reporting to establish credibility among the viewers and pave ways for cooperation among all stake holders including media men. No doubt the live coverage of television had revolutionized the news media due to its speed but many viewers think that most of the time false and unauthentic information are reported in live coverage (Tuggle, 1999). Chernobyl explosion as a nuclear blast instead of steam blast and reported that 31 casualties took place in the incident in spite casualties were more than thirty one (Vasterman & Dirkzwager, 2005).

There is possibility of incomplete facts, misreporting and speculations in live coverage of news and media ethics especially fair and accurate reporting are ignored (Tuggle & Huffman, 2010). Media should focus to extract speculations in emergency situation but

most of the time inaccurate and distorted facts are going on in spite of genuine facts in live reporting of crisis because gatekeepers have least power over news and information when destruction occurs (Lasorsa, 2003). Field reporters and editors are facing several ethical issues including false, incomplete and unconfirmed information and footage makes no sense at all particularly in live reporting of crisis and most of the time live coverage is full of vague content (Gilboa, 2005). Media outlets failed to broadcast actual information regarding the reason and consequences of disaster and its main focus is on destruction to generate hype and breaking news to sell the story (Ali, 2013). Television channels are focusing to report such footage that viewers especially female cannot bear to watch because most of television coverage content is full of common people suffering particularly in war because it is the media strategy to dramatize the situation to sell people sufferings and miseries (Höijer, 2004). Ethical consideration should be kept in mind while reporting terrorist attacks because most of the time television channels reporting involve many ethical risks like sensational content (Asogwa & Attah, 2012). The intensity of terrorist attacks may be reduced if media avoid excessive coverage of terrorist attacks as television live coverage of 9/11 attacks pave ways for worldwide support (Katz, 2007). American television channels could have showed much violent content following 9/11 attacks but it tried to limit it as televisions avoided to broadcast footage of people, who were burning to death and images of people bodies parts (Mogensen, 2008).

Excessive reporting of crisis can force the donors to assist the trouble hit people and coverage of 1992 starvation in Somalia compelled the United States of America to begin rescue efforts in that country known as Operation Restore Hope (Rotberg, 2002). People believe that news on television is highly credible as they can watch what is actually taking place on the ground (Snoeijer & Semetko, 2002). All television channels in India overlooked

media ethics especially responsibility in live coverage of terrorist attacks and broadcast live footage of killings that have strong effects on viewers mind (Ravi, 2012).

Another study found sensationalism in Pakistani television news channels on several issues including bombings and drone air strikes while television channels most of time broadcast usual news stories as flash news to create sensationalism (Raza & Jan, 2012). Television live coverage of lawyers' movement for the restoration of judiciary proved very useful and shaped the public opinion in favor of the independent judiciary (Ahmed, 2012).

### **Social Responsibility Theory of Press**

Social Responsibility theory states that media should act as a platform of different views, should be answerable to society and ignore those information that incite violence or create law and order situation while news should be accurate and balanced (Fourie, 2001). This theory also states that being an entity media should serve in such a way to protect public right (Da Silva, 2007). Media in the United States acted in an irresponsible manner in 1995 and claimed that heart attack chance might be 60 percents for those patients, who taking calcium for hypertension, this news not only created fear but also forced many among them to avoid such treatment (Middleton, 2009). Therefore, this theory is most relevant to the current study because Social Responsible Theory of Press stressed on journalists and media to play its role as per ethics in the society.

### **Hypothesis**

The current study will focus on three aspects:

**H.1:** GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA TV act in an irresponsible manner in live coverage of crisis.

**H.2:** GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA TV report unauthentic information in live coverage of crisis.

**H.3:** GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA televisions sensationalize the news in live coverage of crisis.

### **Methodological Design**

The basic aims of the study is to explore ethical issues in television channels live reporting of crisis to provide a framework to all stake holders to eradicate or at least reduce such issues in the interest of society. The study will adopt qualitative research design to find out the potential results of the study. The researchers apply qualitative content analysis of television news channels to probe ethical issues in live reporting of crisis. Harold Lasswell introduced media content analysis as a systematic process to study media particularly propaganda but it was used as a research methodology in media studies in 1950s following arrival of television, the qualitative content analysis studies is the connection between the message and understanding of audience (Macnamara, 2005).

The current study is about to explore ethical issues in television live reporting of crisis and for the purpose of the study 30 private television news channels of Pakistan have been taken as population. News reports of GEO, DUNYA and EXPRESS televisions will be unit of analysis for the purpose of this study. The researcher has collected news reports from the spot on Bhjoa airplane crash, Jinnah Avenue incident and Wagah border Lahore blast to explore ethical issues in live reporting of crisis. The researcher utilized convenient sampling for the collection of data and three private television channels GEO, DUNYA and EXPRESS news were selected to explore ethical issues in live reporting of crisis. The events of Bhoja airplane crash, Jinnah Avenue incident and Wagah border Lahore blasts have been collected and these incidents will be taken as a sampling frame for the purpose of this study.

### **Conceptualization of Key Variables**

**Irresponsible reporting:** Journalists should not report such materials that glorify brutality in the society while they must be very sensitive about reporting on death, injury and

violence related events and sympathetic toward victims and their relatives (Tahmina, 2010). The current study developed categories and sub categories of the variable of irresponsible reporting on the basis of above academic work. For the purpose of this study irresponsible reporting means portrayal of violent content like dead bodies, injured, sound of firing, showing of weapons, fight and scuffle, exploiting grief of victims' families, law enforcing agencies movement and spreading chaos among the public.

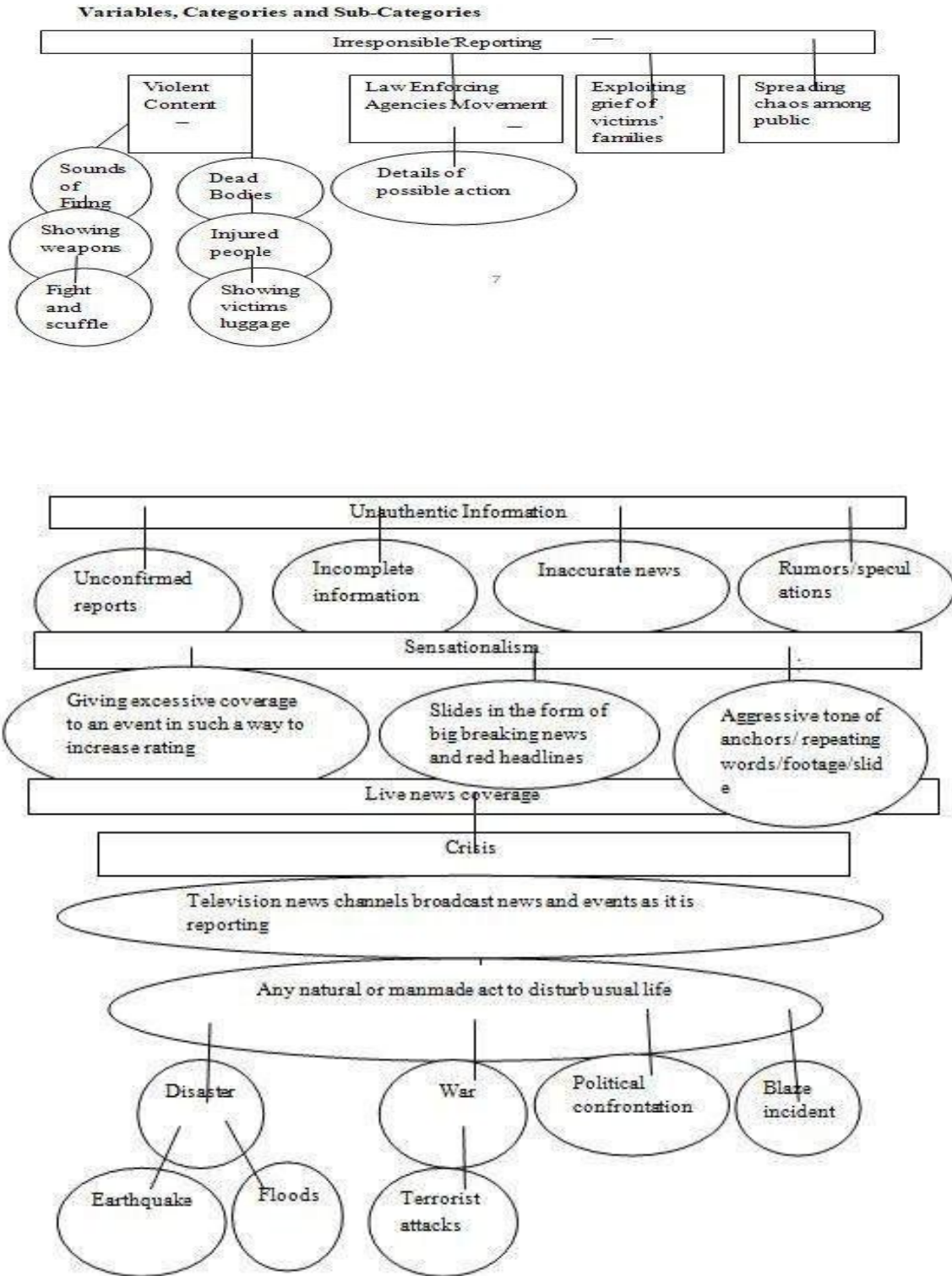
**Unauthentic Information:** Un-authentic means a combination of words that cannot convey any meanings. This variable is categorized in form of unconfirmed , incomplete, inaccurate news and rumors/speculations.

**Sensationalism:** American Heritage Dictionary says evoking feelings and emotions with help of exaggeration and unnatural effect is called sensationalism (Grabe & Barnett, 2001). It means to report in such way to create hype and give extra ordinary coverage to a news story or event to boost viewership.

**Crisis:** Any manmade and natural situation that disturbs the usual life is called crisis. It has potential to create disturbance socially, politically and constitutionally.

**Live coverage:** Television news channels broadcast news as it is reporting under the tag of live.





**Instrument and Data Collection**

An instrument was formed to collect data accordingly. Videos of different duration and timing about three different incidents have been collected and content of the videos will provide indicators. For the purpose of the present study, first of all ethical issues have been divided into sub-categories and indicators to form a technique for data analysis and interpretation. The videos of different duration and timing were carefully analyzed and observed. The presentation and content of different news reports were taken as unit of analysis while different videos of the television channels collected but main focus was on inclusion of relative data. The instrument has been constituted following several meetings and discussions with the supervisor of the present study and other scholars at the department of this University. The researcher has collected the data independently but has been discussed with the supervisor and other scholars. For the purpose of this study, the researcher has collected different news reports of the Bhoja airplane crash, Jinnah avenue incident and Wagah border Lahore blast to find out the potential results of this study. It has been commented that the instrument of the current study was comprehensive that included several aspects of required data and is useful for the current study. However, this is a limited study because the study covered only specific incidents and analyzed different timing and duration footages to explore the ethical issues in live reporting of crisis.

### **Data Analysis**

The study is concentrated on finding out ethical issues i.e. irresponsible reporting, unauthentic information and sensationalism in GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA News live coverage of crisis. The researcher analyzed the content of television channels to explore ethical issues in live reporting of crisis. Coverage of Bhoja airplane crash in Rawalpindi, Jinnah Avenue Incident Islamabad and Wagah border Lahore blast have been analyzed for the purpose of the present study.

H.1: GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA NEWS channels act in an irresponsible manner in live coverage of crisis.

### **Bhoja Airplane Crash**

Several news reports of GEO, Express and Dunya news on Bhoja airplane crash have been collected and analyzed to explore irresponsible reporting in coverage of the sad episode. The researchers' observed that the television broadcast footage of the victims' mobile phones, clothes, note books, ID cards, tickets and their other luggage. In the same footage, GEO news also showed smoke in clothes of a passenger and reporter commented that it might be the clothes of an unfortunate passenger. The researchers observed that news channels also broadcast luggage of the victims including clothes, jewelry, glasses and tickets while fully exploited the carnage. It has been observed that the channels mostly acted irresponsibly in live coverage of Bhoja airplane crash.

### **Jinnah Avenue Incident Islamabad**

The researchers inquired content of news channel to explore irresponsible reporting in live coverage of Jinnah Avenue incident. It has been observed that overall trend of the coverage was irresponsible as the footage has violent content like sound of firing, showing weapons, scuffle between the local leader and armed man. Similarly, dialogue between the police and armed man, and police action were on-aired on the television screen. End footage of the channel started with the sound of firing and concluded with the bullets. The footage showed that an armed man is firing indiscriminately in the presence of his kids. The researchers found six indicators violent content, sound of firing, showing weapons, scuffle, showing law enforcing agencies action and spreading chaos out of eleven operationalized indicators in content of news channels.

### **Wagah border Lahore blast**

The researchers have collected news coverage of Wagah border explosion to explore irresponsible reporting. The researchers observed that Geo News showed weeping people at the hospital and many others people in a sad and uncertain situation. It has been observed that the coverage of the incident created panic and chaos among the viewers and general public especially among those whose relatives came from outside of Lahore for picnic. Express news showed injured people, who were shifted to hospital for medical treatment. It has been observed that no one could realize that the television broadcast the footage of dead bodies or injured that created more and more confusion and chaos among the people. The researcher found three indicators showing injured people, exploiting grief of victims' families and spreading chaos among public out of eleven operationalized indicators in content of News channel.

H.2: GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA NEWS report unauthentic information in live coverage of crisis.

### **Bhoja Airplane Crash**

Initially, GEO news reported that a plane crashed near Rawalpindi and repeated the news again and again in the form of breaking news without giving enough information. GEO news reported that there is contradictory information about an air-crash in Rawalpindi. Initial reporting of the GEO news was incomplete and unconfirmed. The channels did not give details about the spot of accident. Express news reported that earlier there was news about a helicopter crash in the area. Dunya news channel also reported in the same manner. The researchers found two indicators unconfirmed and incomplete information out of four operationalized indicators in content of News channels.

### **Jinnah Avenue Incident Islamabad**

The researchers have collected several news reports of GEO, EXPRESS and DUNYA news about Jinnah Avenue incident to explore unauthentic information in live coverage of

crisis. It has been observed that the channels reported breaking news about an armed man in Islamabad and then started non-stop coverage of the event. The researcher observed that news channels reported incomplete, unconfirmed and inaccurate news because it did not give any background information about the identity of the armed man and his motives. The channel also misreported about the name of armed man as dubbing him with different names while quoting different sources that created further confusion. The researcher found out of four operationalized indicators, three indicators incomplete, unconfirmed and inaccurate information in this case. The researcher observed that the channels reported unauthentic information in live coverage of Jinnah Avenue incident Islamabad.

### **Wagah Border Lahore Blast**

The researchers observed that initially the news channels reported that a cylinder blast took place near Wagah border Lahore. The channel also expressed fear about the casualties in the blast and repeated again and again that a cylinder explosion took place at a market near Wagah border Lahore. Channels quoted sources as saying that three Rangers personnel were injured in the cylinder explosion. Later developments showed that it was a suicide blast instead of cylinder explosion and the channel misreported the incident due to competitive nature of the market. Express news channel reported vague news about the nature of the explosion as the reporter of the channel stated that he has no idea that whether or not it was cylinder explosion. It has been observed that Dunya News reported contrast information about the death toll as news ticker claimed that 37 people killed while the reporter stated that 39 were killed and in the same news report a top police official confirmed 45 people death. Out of four operationalized indicators i.e. three indicators unconfirmed, incomplete and inaccurate information have been found in the content of news channels.

H.3: GEO, DUNYA and EXPRESS NEWS sensationalize news in live reporting of crisis.

**Bhoja Airplane Crash**

It has been observed that news channels suspended the routine transmission and excessively covered the Bhoja airplane crash. The channels displayed red breaking news about Bhoja airline crash and the entire screen of the television covered by slides in form of big breaking news and headlines. The focus of the anchorperson was news about a passenger plane crash near Rawalpindi and repeated the news again and again with full energy. The channels repeated the plane crash news seven times within three minutes. The channel also repeatedly displayed several slides inscribed with different headlines and breaking news like plane crash, number of passengers, bad weather and no official confirmation. In this case out of three operationalized indicators i.e. three indicators excessive coverage, slides in the form of big breaking news/red headlines and repeating words/slides/anchorperson aggressive tone have been found in the content of news channels.

**Jinnah Avenue Incident**

Several news reports of Jinnah Avenue incident have been collected and analyzed to know whether or not television sensationalizes the news in live coverage of crisis. The researcher observed that the channel excessively covered the entire episode of the Jinnah Avenue incident and covered minute details and developments about the incident. It has been observed that the scuffle between the armed man and a local leader was broadcast several times on television within duration of a few minutes. The researcher observed that anchorpersons termed the scene wonderful and amazing one and commenting like a sport event. The anchorperson's tone was aggressive and full of vigor and repeated the news again and again to create hype. The anchorperson and cameras were concentrating on the scuffle between the armed man and a local leader and repeating words like you are watching live scene from Islamabad. The channel displayed big and red slides in form of breaking news and claimed that viewers can watch this exclusively scene only on our news channel. The

researcher observed that TV channels have sensationalized the news as out of three operationalized indicators, three indicators excessive coverage, repeating news/footage/ aggressive tone of anchorpersons and big slides in form of braking news have been found in TV live coverage of Jinnah Avenue incident.

### **Wagah border Lahore Blast**

Several news reports about Wagah border Lahore blast have been collected and analyzed to know whether or not television channels sensationalize news in live coverage of crisis. It has been observed that the incident was excessively covered by all three channels and provided all sort of details about the latest development. The channels suspended the routine transmission and broke out the news about Wagah border Lahore explosion. The channel used big slides in the form of red breaking news and headlines to grab the attention of the viewers. Initially, the tone of the anchorperson was aggressive and repeated the news and slides about the Wagah border Lahore explosion again and again. The researcher observed that the focus of the television was to repeat words and slides about the nature of the blast and death toll and repeated it again and again. News channels also covered the incident under the tag of exclusive to attract more and more viewers. In this case out of three operationalized indicators, three indicators excessive coverage, repeating news / aggressive tone of anchorpersons and big slides in form of braking news have been found in live of coverage of Wagah border Lahore blast. The researchers observed that News channels sensationalized news in live coverage of Wagah border Lahore explosion.

### **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations**

Media is being considered most powerful instrument to influence the public opinion in favor or against of any issue or subject. Media scholars have been discussing ethics and it has been remained a major subject in media studies. However, status of media and ethics are not static and change with each passing day. Today is the age of modern technology and you

can make your access to media too much easy as compared to past. Similarly, the approach of the media organizations has also changed about the events and issues. Therefore, new studies should be conducted over the role of media in the society. The current study focus is media ethics and television live reporting of crisis. According to literature review television live reporting has many positive and negative aspects and all media scholars believe that live coverage has the potential to utilize for fruitful purpose. Similar is the case in Pakistan, because media especially television live coverage had played key role in restoration of deposed judges and democracy in the country but at the same time media scholars criticize media for violation of ethics. Therefore, more and more focus should be given to its role in the society particularly in crisis situation. Many studies have been conducted on media ethics worldwide to persuade media and journalists to perform its due role with freedom and responsibility for the general interest of humanity. It has been observed that media ethics has not yet been implemented hundred percent in many parts of the world due to many factors including lack of training, awareness, education and competitive nature of the news market. According to BBC guideline, live coverage may include many risks including inappropriate use of language, misleading of audience, unexpected, potentially inappropriate coverage of injuries and deaths in local or international appearance. The available literature over the ethical concerns suggests that there is no fast and hard rules of media ethics to apply hundred percent but ethical risks may be reduced to great extent with the help of training, awareness and education. It has been observed that television channels may commit such mistakes because gate keepers and editorial control have minimum role in live reporting of crisis. It has also been observed that most of the time television channels reported inaccurate or unconfirmed news in time of crisis as the study found same trend in Wagah border suicide blast, Jinnah Avenue incident Islamabad and Bhoja airline crash. Sensationalism has been found in content of television live reporting of crisis to great extent. The study observed that



the television channels committed ethical violations due to many factors like competition, lack of training, and awareness. The concerned officials are also responsible for this practice of the media because there is no one to limit the media men to a specific area during the time of crisis. In the above episodes PEMRA also did not play its due role. The researcher observed that the passive role of media watch dog is also responsible for the violation of ethics in live reporting of crisis.

**Acknowledgements:** This article has been generated from the thesis of M.Phil. which was submitted to the higher education commission of Pakistan (HEC) for the purpose of academic requirement.

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