

alumnus Pankaj Vohra on Professionalism in Media Dynamics

...his 1036 - week Signature Column “**Between Us**”



By [Pankaj Vohra](#) | 3 March, 2018 The Sunday Guardian

Television coverage of the horrific and sudden death of cine superstar Sridevi at the Jumeirah Emirates Towers Hotel in Dubai has exposed serious fault lines in the electronic media, thereby underlining the need for more responsible and informed reporting. Driven by intense competition to outdo each other, several TV channels indulged in shameless sensationalism or displayed absolute ignorance of the manner in which a crime story should be dealt with. It is not for the first time that the inherent weaknesses in the overall reportage of incidents pertaining to unnatural deaths have come to fore so far as this genre of media is concerned. In January 2014, when Sunanda Pushkar was found dead in her room at the Leela Hotel in Chanakyapuri, clueless anchors struggled to take the story forward. The primary reason for this faux pas was that they had never covered crime, the first basic beat a newcomer in the print media is assigned while being included in the reporting unit. Therefore, the majority of those working in the electronic media are unacquainted with the key components of crime reporting such as, the First Information Report (FIR), the Medico-Legal Case, the Autopsy Examination, the role of the forensic experts and so on. There is scant respect for the sequence of events as well as the chronological series of facts, not to dismiss the manner in which the police functions.

Therefore, several questions that should be asked on day one itself, never get raised. Instead, sheer ignorance is conspicuous. Many years ago in Pune, when there was the German Bakery blast, a reporter of a leading channel accosted the SHO, at the instance of the anchor, and bombarded him with irrational questions without comprehending that at that particular stage, minutes after the explosion, his first priority was to rush the injured to the hospital.

During the coverage of the 26/11 terrorist strike at Mumbai in 2008, TV reports enabled the Pakistani handlers of the terrorists to receive a fair idea of what the Indian security forces were doing. Therefore, they were able to communicate to the terrorists the movements of the security personnel. In any other country, television would not expose the police or other agencies or jump to any conclusions till the authorities communicated the official version.

In the Sridevi case, TV channels, without verifying the videos of a wedding attended by her, along with her husband and younger daughter, conveyed the decisive impression that she died within hours after the event. The fact, as it turned out later, was that the wedding took place several days earlier, and most of the guests as well as her husband, Boney Kapoor, had returned to India while she decided to stay back. Apparently, no one thought it was their while of checking out the details.

On 25 February, TV channels had come to the inference that she died following a massive cardiac arrest, and therefore brought in top heart surgeons and cardiologists such as Dr Naresh Trehan and Dr Ashok Seth to express their medical opinion. For the entire day, the cause of death was listed as “heart failure”, despite the fact that the post mortem report was yet to be released. The following day, however, the Dubai authorities announced the cause of death as “accidental drowning”, yet some TV

channels persisted with the views of the heart specialists. Should they have not known that forensic experts would be better equipped to give a credible opinion on the matter? *The presence of heart specialists was akin to having hockey experts comment on a cricket match.* The appalling matter was that on the basis of half-baked facts, the electronic media was constructing blotchy theories of their own.

Another notable feature of the Sridevi presentation was that since it had become the biggest story, top people, who mostly have greater experience of handling political or economic issues, stepped into the limelight, thus ***unprofessionally sidelining crime reporters.***

On another note, there also was an attempt to rope in the regional factor in the portrayal of the mega-star. Panellists were at pains to reiterate that she was truly a pan-Indian queen of the silver screen, and her contribution to Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam cinema was no way less than her offering to Bollywood. Sridevi was a national legend and, therefore, there should have been no reason to link her to one region or the other. She was to the celluloid world its most famous actress, who after the late Meena Kumari, and Hema Malini, could truly be called an iconic star.

Needless to say, *TV channels have some very fine journalists who understand the nuances of various beats and the overall importance of fair and objective coverage.* However, apparently they are not the favourites of their bosses, and thus repeatedly are denied the first right to cover events related to criminal investigation—the area of their specialisation. The electronic media is guilty of creating public opinion on insufficient facts and are thus responsible for influencing judges to act according to the manufactured perception, rather than the evidence on record.

This, indeed, is *an extremely high-risk trend* and so to a large degree is obstructive to justice. The Sridevi story thus should serve as a lesson for the electronic media to *reinforce their commitment to truthful reportage* rather than indulging in over dramatised sensationalism. **Between Us.**

*Among the most prolific and insightful commentators to emerge out of India's Fleet Street - Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, for the uninitiated ! - Pankaj has achieved a professional milestone of 1050 dedicated columns of **Between Us.***

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