THE NEW NEWSROOM

A deep dive into how Indian news broadcasters embraced technology to ease broadcast in the pandemic

BY ANISHA GAKHAR
In the past few months of the ongoing pandemic, it has become all the more imperative to keep abreast with what is happening around the world. For news broadcasters, it has become important to report critical matters of public interest, now, more than ever. As a result, news channels have posted a 298% jump in viewership, as per a recent report by Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC). As a result, the share of news to total TV viewership grew to an overwhelming 21% from 7%.

Approaching people for a story directly, either physically or through a video call, is an important part of newsgathering. It helps to ensure the authenticity of the story. Journalists have been adapting to the new normal amidst the global health situation, by means of using newer technology along with smartphones, internet and social media. Many news anchors have set up cameras within their home spaces, and host shows from within the limited space available from home. They use their network’s branding in the background, so it exudes a formal look and feel. The broadcasts are relayed to the production control room using home broadband and 4G mobile hotspots. But in the news business, more often than not, it becomes unavoidable to go out in the community and report. In such scenarios, technology helps ease newsgathering. Indian news channels are keeping pace with advancements to up their game in these hard times.

**CHALLENGES POSED BY THE PANDEMIC**

In digital newsgathering, a news company needs to employ multiple alternatives in any given scenario for getting live video and audio from news anchors, and TV guests for news debate shows. OB vans are used where the broadband/data card based backpack are not feasible.

Sudheer Narayanan, VP, Technology, Republic World, said, “Due to the pandemic, guests for the news debates were not willing to come to the studio physically, and we had to devise a way to get live feeds from their homes. Due to movement restrictions, sending backpack units to guests wasn’t feasible, so we relied on smartphones/tablets/laptop using broadband connections.”

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Along with technology to aid, news reporters have been following safety practices on field.

Manish Sharma, SVP, ABP News

"Initially, it was a challenging as none of us had witnessed a situation like this before. Physical presence for technical team in news gathering is highly critical. That is why we established enough preventive measures to keep us functional and safe. We showed resilience by doing anchoring from home, working extra hours on few days so that other colleagues could avoid coming to office. Our field employees (reporters, camerapersons and DSNG engineers) worked from remote locations and had been strictly advised not to come to studio unless unavoidable. Live guest debate shows were a major concern in this situation as guests didn’t allow our crew inside their premises. Visitors were also not permitted to enter our workplace," said Manish Sharma, SVP, ABP News.

With the lockdown, the newsgathering scenario witnessed a radical change. “On one hand, social distancing had forced people to consume more and more at-home media and on the other, the entire newsgathering industry was getting disrupted with a new set of challenges—ones that were never experienced before. But ‘news’ could not have possibly stopped. So we had to adapt to the new normal and enable work-from-home environment for news anchors, reporters etc. using available resources. Main solutions that we used for facilitating this was from Skype and LiveU,” said Rajesh Sharma, VP, Broadcast Operations, TV18 Broadcast Limited.
**WORKING FROM HOME**

During the pandemic, news broadcasters depended heavily on technological advancements to continue broadcasting news seamlessly, while maintaining social distancing norms. “Dependency on technology has increased manyfold and for extended hours. Our anchors were comfortable with the idea of anchoring full-length news shows and debates from the comfort and safety of their home. Our studios are equipped with better cameras, lighting and audio infrastructure; however, our crew was given training, tips and tricks to ensure a decent quality of video, audio and lighting in their home setup. Yes, every step was a learning for everyone and everyone were comfortable in this transition to the new norm,” elaborated Sudheer.

On being asked if work-from-home impacted their operations, Manish said, “Yes! To an extent, it was a new normal for working, and affected conventionally-established workflows. App-based news gathering solutions, which were earlier on trial mode, became the main line tool for news acquisitions. Initially, it was very difficult to manage live news shows as our reporters and camerapersons had a very limited access to people and existing news gathering equipment. The team, then learnt new processes and managed shows and studio-based debates with new formats.”

▲ News anchors from around the globe are using accessible technology to make work-from-home easier
Majority of our digital teams were working from home for extended periods, and we designed our infrastructure on cloud keeping remote working in our mind, in the design stage itself. We were using existing tools and infrastructure. However, video editing for TV production, and graphic production on remote, were not employed as a process during normal work culture since high bit rate broadcast quality video is preferred over remote production. We employed a lot of off-shelf tools available to meet such requirements. Free tools like HP RGS (HP Remote Graphics Software) and HP Workstation came in handy.”

Rajesh echoed the same sentiment, “If we need to survive this pandemic, we cannot compromise with quality. We could no longer rely on the traditional way of newsgathering. Technologies that were hardly used before suddenly became essentials for the media and newsgathering world. All of a sudden, we all were confined to the walls of our homes. The news reporters and guests were not allowed to visit the production studios. During these unprecedented situations, LiveU Smart came to our rescue. Their bonded transmission technology helped mobile journalists cover live HD news from the field using their own mobile device. We were equipped to go live from our homes, do guest interviews, without actually travelling to the location.”

“Using smartphones for conducting live interviews was instrumental in that phase. We used a variety of apps. The LiveU team

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Broadcasting

24x7 operation and remote contribution is a standard and essential requirement, and hence, is already a part of our core infrastructure design philosophy now. We will continue to use it. Our focus will mostly be on IP oriented broadcast workflow now. This will further accelerate from broadcast operations point-of-view as well from the solution providers’ focus as well.”

When asked if he feels that the pandemic has brought in new augmentations, Manish exclaimed, “Absolutely! After the pandemic ends, the new methodologies will be an added advantage to news gathering as they will vastly help in increasing our reach without deploying additional resources.”

To maintain social distancing, news anchors have been hosting shows from within the confines of their homes helped with us for guest interviews with LiveU Central. This helped bridge the issue of social distancing of camera crew at guest premises. Anchors and guests could connect live within moments. Earlier, this process was complicated from the installation point-of-view. LiveU Central provided us with a pre-configured installation process for guests to use,” explained Manish.

Here to Stay?

The new methodologies have simplified operations and workflows. On asked whether these tools will stay even after the pandemic recedes, Rajesh elaborated, “Our industry, like any other, has been going through a lot of changes, few of which are permanent. With everything slowly opening, we are still using the technologies and methodologies that we have been using since the beginning of pandemic. Slowly, these ‘new normal’ methods are gaining acceptance among end users, and that gives me a reason to believe that we may keep using them even when the situation is well under control.”

Sudheer agreed, “Yes, news broadcast is a

Inference

Sometimes, hardships bring in opportunities. Necessity is the mother of invention, they say. The rapid proliferation of new technology in the news broadcast domain has allowed for companies to keep pace with changing dynamics of the market and has led to them believing in embracing changes. The flexible, the better. ■

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