

Psychological consequences of watching television news channels

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News media happens to be an integral part of modern life as it plays an informational as well as educational role. It helps people to update themselves and be aware of the surroundings. Furthermore it keeps them conscious of the society and world in general.¹ Television news particularly provide its audiences 24 hour live coverage with repeated telecasts catering to a large number of audiences. The efforts and dangers taken by reporters to report the updated news are merited widely.^{1,2} However, with so many blessings there are some hidden alarming dangers. News channels according to many researchers have changed in their very nature. From the print media to the live telecast much has been altered in the temperament and presentation of the news.¹⁻³ Sensationalization of news of violence is a debated topic, not to forget that the violence and its frequency of occurrence around the world has also changed and hence increased reporting of it becoming more of a challenge.² It may be astounding to know that television which was always thought to be an entertainer and relaxing partner has now become a reason for many negative psychological effects.^{2,3}

In a country like Pakistan which is going through a lot of political turmoil, terrorist's attacks and other serious problems, news channels are considered to be the most frequently watched channel in majority of the households.^{4,5} Though there is no second opinion on the fact that it provides the most updated information to populace within no time with live coverage and fine graphical presentation, it does carry many veiled disadvantages.⁶ Seeing live events of violence and actual deaths of victims in one's living room leads to an urgency and personal involvement to events that may cause psychological disturbance.¹ Live coverage of attacks, speculation about their causes, repeated review of events, and implication of future such attacks have become a normal routine tasks of the news channels. While the live extensive coverage and risk taken are merited widely, the stress caused by such coverage is a novel bi-product which has not been studied extensively.¹ Literature also revealed that viewers experience a sad mood and anxiety

after watching any negative news,^{2,6-8} however the feelings are momentary but a person can correlate such experiences with events in one's own life.¹

People are more attracted to negative news than positive news. According to statistics revealed by news channels, sensational news sell more than any other news segment.^{9,10} After watching TV news, those thoughts tend to linger on in one's mind resulting in thinking about it for a long time. People are even reported to visualize the things and circumstances in negative way and start feeling the stress in life. The stress generated in the above fashion effects other areas of life as well.^{11,12} The images seen on TV linger on in the mind and cause tremendous psychological effects other than stress.¹³ The negative psychological effects tend to attract people of all age groups from inculcating long term effects in children to effect youth and mount depression in old age people.¹³ Children begin to notice and react to television in the age when they are unable to distinguish between facts and fantasy and may receive watching violence as an ordinary occurrence.^{8,11,13} In a society where we live the exposure to violence may be of any type like video games, media or surroundings that will affect personal behaviour. It was also revealed in a research conducted by Wood et al that exposure to media violence increases aggressive interactions with strangers, classmates, and friends among children and youth.¹³ It may also lead to feeling threatened, which in turn can result in loss of resources and other negative effects.¹⁴

Although watching television and particularly news channels and news segments is a voluntary act, however literature highlighted that exposure to news channels increases stress score of a person and different news watching habits have severe implications to a person's psychological health.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ People are getting insensitive and aggressive with increased exposure to news channels.^{12,17} Their psychological health is being adversely affected and so urgent measures should be directed in this regard to counteract it. Not only that high stress score would affect an individual badly, it has a great influence on lives of people living with them. This is an adverse influence on the society's peace in general.^{18,19} While searching literature, very few studies were found on psychological impact of watching television news.^{6,13,17}

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Especially in Pakistan information is scarce²⁰ particularly research on psychological effects of TV news, hence there is need to explore this topic in our part of the world for the consequences.

It is important that media should realize their responsibility in providing a basis for good culture, free of cost health programmes, free education and awareness to people. Media should practice censorship while showing scenes of violence or those which are disturbing. They should practice a code of conduct strictly with the participants of political talk shows and should avoid sensationalizing news. Repeated telecasting of news of violence should be regulated and monitored as it creates hype and panic among people.²¹ Achievements made by the nation or citizens should be highlighted and culture should be promoted to present our nation as a reputed one amongst international audiences and to develop positive energy and an optimistic mind set. News coverage of any sad or demoralizing event should be broadcast in a way that could buffer its impact.²² Media itself should be used to design programmes for stress management techniques that could develop an ability to cope with negative events coverage.

Breaking news segment should not be used to make profitability however it should be used in times of need and urgency. The panic created by breaking news should be made placid and trauma creating activities should be restricted. Media channels should have a health manager or psychologist ensuring the content and its execution to be safe for public health. Health standard should be made part of the policy whereas training sessions for media personnel in public psychology should be arranged. Government should bring laws to restrict news media to sensationalize news and show obscene scenes of violence.

The television news channels are a good source of keeping the viewers updated with the latest developments in all sectors of life. They should provide education and a positive way of managing the day to day burdens without causing undue sensation and panic to the viewers.

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