

# "Breaking news" is breaking the news

By  [Dustin Chick](#)

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As communicators, we spend a lot of our time on the news. We put a huge amount of effort into understanding news cycles, the audiences who consume the news, the content that will be naturally sharable and the messaging that most resonates - all as key tools of our work. It makes sense, words have power and when we choose the right words, we create what become the most powerful conversations.



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The ability for those of us on this side of the news cycle to do our jobs properly relies on the quality of our relationships with both journalists and editors. Indeed, when the connection between both sides of the news flow works (and it works effectively), it delivers the seeds of these powerful conversations.

## Underlying sentiment and mood

Strategically, we watch and listen to conversations. They are powerful indicators of underlying reputation and sentiment. The opposite is also true, as when you ignore these conversations you create a disconnect and lose relevance and to a large degree your cultural currency.

Perhaps this is why I can't shake this feeling that I need to sit some editor friends of mind down and tell them they are getting it all wrong – that they are in effect undermining their own cultural currency.

The news cyclone (as one senior editor often refers to it) is potentially alienating readers, listeners and viewers. The constant stream of updates (which are not always all that accurate or even balanced) is good for general “awareness”, but is very possibly showing hints of chasing away the very people it should be “serving”.

The issue here is underlying sentiment and mood. So, while actual audience numbers are climbing (people want to know), there is a foundational shift in how people feel about the news. The relationship with news is changing and there is a very serious need to acknowledge this and create balance. Factually audiences are tuning in to know, but there is a definite undercurrent of “I just can’t anymore”. Quite simply – we face the prospect that breaking news is now literally breaking the news.

The question is why?

## Battle for eyeballs

According to one industry leader, it comes down to the battle for eyeballs. You only have to look at the climbing numbers behind a group such as #ImStaying (currently around 1,2m followers) when you measure it against the average circulation of major newspapers to see the visible change in sentiment. Simply put, in a depressed advertising environment media houses are doing what they can to attract audiences. But, the unintended consequences of this is effectively clickbait – which while it may have some initial upside – actually delivers the opposite result over time. The greatest cost of this is not advertising but rather credibility.

But its more than this. Its judgement and responsibility.

The inherent danger of a lack of cultural currency for media is that it does acute damage to its role in our society, and unfortunately plays into the hands of those who already seed doubt around issues of accuracy and bias. It’s an unnecessary own goal that requires both a shift in thinking as well as active steps by leaders (in this case editors) to lead by example.

The challenge is actually not one of attracting audiences – it’s one of deeply understanding (and appreciating) them. Because while journalists play a critical role in our society, they don’t (and can’t) do so as outcasts. If we do not acknowledge that our audiences are tuning out and our role in this, then we face the very real prospect of an unsustainable media – and that is not good for anyone.

It’s a tough conversation to have, but to win back relevance there needs to be an understanding of three key drivers of cultural currency:

1. **Be Real:** It’s not necessary to “write up” the story to make it feel more serious than it is. We know it’s serious, there is more merit in being sober and balanced than falling into the trap of clickbait. You are able to progress the story without having to play it up – when the very real need of your audience is accurate and relevant information. It’s a responsibility to train and guide more junior members of the newsroom to avoid these pitfalls.
2. **Be Balanced:** There is other news out there, or has the rest of our society just stopped functioning? Diversity of content is a key strategic communications lever and the same holds true in all the news we consume. Quite simply - tell us what else is happening, balance the light and the shade and provide a small glimmer of normalcy. Surely, “excitement” around how many people have survived Covid-19 is as newsworthy?
3. **Be Unquestionable:** Get it right before anything else. A robbery at a flower shop is not a food riot (by any stretch of the imagination) and if we are truly putting the national interest at heart then we should avoid unnecessary half-truths or untruths. Chasing the headline is less of a responsibility than chasing the truth - or heaven forbid we fall foul of accusations of fake news and no ability to defend this.

Again, it’s a tough conversation to have. But as communicators, we are not known to shy away from some robust debate. Above all it’s our role to strategically counsel (as we would for any organisation whose reputation we are tasked with managing) and if this triggers debate then the issue clearly has deep merit that warrants it. Equally, we believe that we need

to have this specific conversation – failing which social distancing will extend to the news – and that is not good for anyone.

## ABOUT DUSTIN CHICK

Dustin is Managing Partner of Razor, the PR, reputation and culture and communications agency in the M&C Saatchi Group. Dustin is recognised as one of the top reputation managers and communicators in Europe, Africa and the Middle East - having being named by the Holmes Report / PROvoke Media as one of its top 25 innovators in public relations across Europe, the Middle East and Africa in 2019.

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