
UNIT 15 BASIC ELEMENTS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

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15.0 INTRODUCTION

Online journalism refers to content created and distributed online. In other words, this is a type of journalism which operates via internet. Online journalism should not be confused with 'citizen journalism'. Online journalism is publishing of information that is equivalent to that of its print and broadcast counterparts (such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television). It follows the professional code of conduct similar to traditional journalism. This is how it differs from citizen journalism, which is not bound by any ethical and professional code of conduct.

Digital media is a technology-driven and evolving medium. New innovations, new ideas and concepts are added to it more frequently than in any other traditional media. The introduction of mobile telephony has made access to news a universal phenomenon. These days, more and more people are using mobile phones to access news and multimedia content. For a better user experience, most media organizations are making their websites responsive.

A responsive website is one which appears the same on all devices including the desktop, tablets and mobile handsets irrespective of their operating system. The mobile has assumed such a central stage in digital communication that organizations have now adopted 'mobile-first' concept. It means a website is designed and developed keeping in mind the mobile handset users instead of the earlier priority which was given to the desktop.

15.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After working through this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the characteristics and features of online journalism;
- know about the works of online journalists and prevailing trends in online journalism;
- comprehend the status of online journalism in India, and
- gain an insight into social networking sites for online journalism.

15.2 UNDERSTANDING ONLINE JOURNALISM

With a few clicks, you can now access almost the entire world of journalism and its vast variety of sources along with multimedia materials. Before we delve deeper into multimedia or online journalism, let us understand a few definitions and keywords. Holly defines online journalism as original writing and reporting that are delivered via the World Wide Web.

Today as we are witnessing that all types of work is getting transferred onto the online mode, the media industry has also not lagged behind but has ventured deeper into it and is exploring new opportunities of online news delivery and related online news businesses. In the prevailing atmosphere of cut-throat competition in the news industry, those news organizations who are not adapting the online medium are expected to lose their competitive edge and may be unable to sustain for long.

You must have experienced that while trying to search for any reading material, picture or video on internet, as you write certain keywords in the search engine you get results running into several hundreds of web pages. Sometimes these links get you on to a blog, many times on to a news website and occasionally to government websites. All these links do not belong to online journalism. Only, websites belonging to media houses or blogs created by professional journalists for providing authentic information to their readers can be categorized as online journalism. Actually, in recent times you might have noticed that the line between professional and personal journalistic writings are blurring significantly, mainly due to proliferation of social media and its popularity.

The online medium provides journalists with a vast range of options to gather information in an interesting and entertaining way. The internet provides opportunity for instant publishing, archiving, linking, use of audio and video with greater

interactivity and also provides instantaneous feedback. All these features give online journalism an upper hand over other media. These key features of online news medium has a great impact on conventional media e.g. newspaper, radio, and television. Online medium is not only posing a challenge to the conventional media but is also forcing them to adopt changes in their newsroom operations and news delivery platforms.

The impact of this can be seen in most daily newspapers as they have begun to use more box items and bulleted information. This is only to make the newspapers easy to browse. Renowned page designer Mario Garcia was engaged to re-launch one of the prominent newspapers in India in the recent past. In a briefing, Gracia suggested that page should be designed in such a way that it should be easy to browse. The broadcast medium also tends to use the interactive and feedback features of online medium. If you listen to radio you will find that the radio jockey asks you to make your song choice online. And TV news channels are using online poll, and particularly many prime time discussion shows are incorporating feeds from live discussion on social media.

This raises an important question - whether the new media can be seen as a threat to conventional media or not? This is a point of debate among scholars. Some believe that online medium will replace conventional media as it has all the qualities of traditional news media. Here in online medium, you can read text, listen to audio and watch video at your convenient time and pace. But others believe that various types of media will continue to co-exist and the online medium will complement all others. Even at present different types of media exist together. However, there are growing examples from the west where print editions are getting significantly reduced in size while correspondingly their digital media presence is growing. In India, the current scenario is quite different. We are witnessing a unique scenario where on the one hand, print editions are growing in the regional languages and equally online journalism outlets are expanding.

15.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM

You have learnt the key features of online journalism; now let us understand the important characteristics of online journalism.

Online: As the word suggests, it operates on a online platform which can be seen or updated in real time. Here breaking news and events can be updated as it happens - like live telecast in television news channels, live updates in news websites are quite common nowadays. While we have had this facility in Radio and TV also where we gather around and take updated information, the difference here is that it can be seen on your computing devices and even hand-held gadgets like mobile with some added features.

Shifted time: Online journalism also takes advantage of shifted time. Online publications can archive stories for now or later. Users can read those stories at any time of their choice. In other medium this facility is not available easily. In the conventional print media, if you want to read any previous day's or month's newspaper you have to get access to the news organization library or one should collect newspapers on daily basis and archive it periodically – which can be quite a tedious task.

Multimedia: Online journalism can include multimedia elements: text and graphics (newspaper and books), sound, music, motion elements and animation (broadcast

medium), 3D, etc. One of the greatest opportunity of multimedia journalism is the ability to combine various media elements for a news story. At present, most media organizations provide derivatives of their 'parent' products. Newspapers are providing digital text, radio organizations are providing audio clips and TV channels are providing streamed video links. But multi media is providing to these news entities an opportunity to adapt other designs also. There are number of sites where we can see this adaptation. Now radio channels are not only providing audio files but also complementing them with images and texts - the All India Radio (AIR) and the Voice of America (VoA) websites are testimony to this.

Newspaper organizations are not only providing digital text but also audio clips and motion pictures - almost all major dailies are practicing this method. TV channels are also complementing their video files with text – similar to newspapers all leading news channels are running their news portals. Seizing this opportunity, online sites are now trying to take full advantage of the array of media formats available. Websites are now complementing a story with flash animation, photo gallery, video and audio clips.

Interactivity: Online journalism is interactive. Hyperlinks are primary mechanism for this interactivity on the web. Through hyperlinks different types of media options are added to a news package to bring more in-depth analysis. Through hyperlinking various elements of lengthy and complex works are added together in a story. Work of an online journalist consists of hyperlinking of own web pages or at times links to other websites.

Interactivity also provides users options to comment and add some information to the existing content. Online sites also conduct online poll to bring in more interactivity. This feature of online journalism is helpful in several ways:

- It makes users' spend more time on the web page.
- It makes the users' experience more enjoyable.
- It helps users to gain more information.
- Users perceive the site navigation easily.

Immediacy: As per Encyclopaedia of Journalism, 'News is like bread-it is best served fresh as it goes stale quickly.' This statement points to the fact that immediacy is a key component of journalism. Journalists have responsibility to provide information as quickly as they can and what better way to do it than through the internet. It is the fastest medium and through this information can be disseminated from personal computer to mobile. With the ability to upload content anytime through a basic internet connection, online media is as immediate as we can get.

But then the question arises-whether immediacy wins accuracy. What can be the priority? As we know on the internet, information can be uploaded by any individual on any social networking site or a blog. Individuals cannot be expected to be guided by professional ethics and code of conduct applicable to organizations. In this scenario, any wrong information uploaded can create a chaotic situation. Hence, it is important for online users to know how to find reliable information.

Hyper-textuality: Hyper-textuality is a prime 'tool' used to introduce interactivity in a web page. Hypertext is a web link which can be used to provide variety of information in one page. These links carry a variety of media content (audio, video,

graphics, animation , etc.) in a story. Through hypertext, journalists enrich their content. So, this being a distinctive unique characteristic of online journalism, it helps differentiate online media differently from other forms of media. Traditional journalism provides for linear presentation of a story while online media brings multi-linearity to the story. It also enables users to be participants when they click their way through hyperlinked set of pages.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note : 1) Use the space provided below for your Answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. List three usages of hypertext in a news story?

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15.4 REPORTING FOR ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

The impact of online media has been so huge that even reporters of conventional media have begun to use online tools for reporting. Journalists take news lead from social media pages and uncover the story. For this purpose, they keep following various personality profiles on the social networking and micro-blogging sites.

We now come to another platform - a citizen blog. People from diverse backgrounds have their own personal blog. They keep writing on a variety of issues. Some blogs carry people's comments on an issue which is popular in mainstream media but some are really important from the reporting point of view. For example, many known personalities keep sharing their experiences on blog and even their viewpoints on certain subjects which also carries news value. Journalists keep following their blogs in order to get lead from there.

There are also examples where journalists are referring to blogs for news coverage. The importance of blog was understood during the Iraq war, when journalists were denied open access to most parts of that country with a camera. Even at that time some journalists managed to send real time information from the war torn zone. Another interesting case is from the USA. The news stories on Monica Lewinsky were first exposed in a blog named drudgepost.com. This was a blog of a journalist who, upon his organization declining to take up that story in print, was forced to post it on his blog and the rest, as they say, is history. The point here is that the enormous potential reach of such social networking sites can be tapped as a good resource for reporting which the journalists are doing regularly these days. Online reporters have yet another challenge in that they have to involve readers in the reporting also. Here journalists do not have any other option. Interactive features of the internet has inherent potential to involve the readers and it becomes the responsibility of an online journalist to facilitate their desire. There are three ways of online reporting.

15.4.1 Traditional Reporting

In the traditional reporting method, the online reporter uses online tools in traditional ways like interviews, observation, looking through documents, reading

online and aggregate opinion. The only difference here is that all these news collection activities are carried out through online. By using e-mail or chat they take interviews, journalists keep browsing different websites and make observations, they read online documents and finally create a story by aggregating opinion.

15.4.2 Open Source Reporting

Traditionally reporters do not share the story idea with their readers while investigating and finding facts in the field. Reporters do not want to lose a potential scoop to their competitors. But reporters in the open source reporting take the opposite route. They share their story idea beforehand and ask users to share their opinion, information and source. After getting information, reporters go through all information provided and come up with a final story. However, it is not mandatory that all the information provided by readers will be used in the final story. It is up to the reporter to use his/her discretion and judgement regarding the information provided/collected.

The open source reporting is based on participatory theory of communication, which is based on the belief that the group knows more than an individual. Open source reporting suggests opening up the reporting process to engage a community of readers in making a report, which will give more information, more analysis than a single reporter. This type of reporting is best suited for small media organizations with limited resources.

15.4.3 Distributive Reporting

Distributive reporting takes open source reporting one step further by relying on readers to submit information. Here, the community itself adds the multifaceted body of work, often covering all angles of the story. It is done especially in stories which affect a large population. For example, the US geological survey's "did you feel it?" earthquake shake maps, where people posted their personal experiences. Another example is the Flickr collections of readers' photographs having same tags.

This type of reporting is helpful in covering a story which has a huge impact and which affects a large population. In such a case, the possibility of readers having first-hand information is more likely and through distributive reporting all possible information can be tapped easily.

As distributive reporting involves readers in story formation it increases the responsibility of a journalist. If it is not handled properly it would turn into anonymity, with fake reports and defamation. But keeping the participation theory in mind, this can turn into the best way of reporting if the readers' identities are checked properly. Journalists have to design this kind of reporting effectively. Distributive reporting can generate a large volume of information in a fraction of the time.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : 1) Use the space provided below for your Answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. How is reporting for online news medium different from reporting for conventional media?

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2. Compare and contrast the open source reporting and distributive reporting.
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15.5 PROFILE OF ONLINE JOURNALISTS

Many people consider online journalism as their dream job, but to become an online journalist you need to have skills of a reporter, editor, designer and other skills which are related to the internet medium. Prior to understanding the profile of an online journalist, it is necessary to understand the various dimensions of online journalism. Online journalism broadly covers three dimensions: integrated production, multi-platform delivery and multi skilled professionals.

15.5.1 Integrated Production

Online contents are created in multimedia format, that contains the combination of any one or more of the following media elements - text, graphics, pictures, audio and video with interactive features. This is carried out by different departments. It also covers video editing, audio editing, designing and text editing. All these departments work together to come up with a final product. Integration between all these departments is very necessary for quality work.

15.5.2 Multi-Platform Delivery

Online contents are delivered through different platforms. Online readers may access contents on personal computer and mobile also. Sometimes they subscribe to social networking platforms to get regular updates. Online journalists need to be ready for multi-platform delivery. Contents created for personal computer would be different from contents created for mobile. Updating social networking page is equally important. While digital technology has made multi-platform delivery much easier but it is important to note that regular human intervention is needed to improve the quality of content. In integrated production every story can be originally produced to fit different platforms at the same time.

15.5.3 Multi Skilled Professionals

To undertake multi-faceted work, the online medium needs multi skilled professionals. The work of an online journalist can be broadly divided into six parts:

Provide quality work: Internet has made working easy for the journalists. Here everyone can do it. It is a challenge for good online journalists to perform well and provide quality work with the help of various internet tools.

Showcase work: After coming up with a quality work, the next challenge is to showcase the work to potential readers. There are several ways in which journalist work can be disseminated. Through the choice of right method to showcase the journalist can greatly enhance the readers experience. Work can be shown through written text, multimedia, using picture galleries and graphics.

Interact with readers: Online medium offers great potential for interactivity. Here journalists can talk to their readers in real time. As an online journalist, one should ask the readers what they do not know and after assessing their need should work accordingly. Online journalist should always try to engage the readers on their turf, never try to preach to them and also help the readers to engage meaningfully amongst themselves. They should let the readers reach a journalist when they wish and also facilitate interpersonal communication by providing contact email or social media ID to the readers.

Help readers to get the complete picture: In online medium, there is always a possibility that users may not be able to assess the desired information or they may get one sided information or incomplete information due to lack of background information. An online journalist should always try to practice responsible sustainable journalism. It can be done by recycling and reusing of the background information. Make sure to provide relevant background information through a hyperlink and also make it easily searchable.

Plan well for story: Make a list of story assets. Then make a list of descriptions of the types of readers who will be interested in the story. Then try to find a path which will suit every reader. Storyboarding is important as it helps to frame the story efficiently.

Be poised at the time of breaking news: At the time of breaking news try to be the first but never forget to cross check the information from different sources. Always remember, giving no information is better than providing wrong information. At the time of breaking news, journalist should be ready to take information from the readers. Tell the readers what the journalist know so far and allow them to give the some more information related to the story if possible.

To complete such a diversity of work in the online field requires multitasking professionals in the newsroom. In other words, more number of professionals in the newsroom who can do more than their normal share of work. A multimedia journalist would develop editing, reporting, design and other skills. Hence, three levels of multi-skilling is required of an online media professional:

- **Media multi-skilling** - it means the journalists capable of producing content for different media;
- **Issue multi-skilling** – they need to report on news related to different thematic areas. It means a journalist covering crime should also feel comfortable covering politics also.
- **Technical multi-skilling** - they are responsible for performing most of the production task. For example, reporters may need to do editing work and if needed work as multimedia professionals also.

Check Your Progress: 3

Note : 1) Use the space provided below for your Answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. State the qualities of multi-skilled professionals in online journalism.

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15.6 TRENDS IN ONLINE JOURNALISM

With new technologies in the digital world cropping up every day along with the changing desires of users it is creating new trends in online journalism. These trends are not only helpful in tapping more users but also in providing new experiences to users.

15.6.1 Time Shift Journalism

The days when we waited for re-telecast of a programme on television are over. Similarly, we do not have to make arrangements for individual recording of some popular show. Because now in the age of internet, all we need to do is to search the internet for the content and watch it at our convenience. The reason is simple, now it is time for time shift journalism or time shift content. Also the time when we first encounter an information and finally the time we consume it can be different. That is why the tab like 'read later' or 'watch later' have become quite common.

15.6.2 Emergence of New Digital Platforms

In order to meet the consumers demand, new technologies are emerging and giving opportunities of new experience of news. Emergence of several new devices like tablets and smartphones are becoming very challenging for online journalism. Compounded with this challenge is the increasing number of operating systems, for example, there are two major types: iOS, and Android in the mobile market. Basically, these new devices are changing the way that we consume news. Online media houses have to be compatible with these changing technologies. Many media houses are coming up with new applications to meet these challenges. But as the product life cycles are getting shorter and shorter in this digital age it is finally up to different news organizations and other online entities to try and figure out how they can produce the kind of product that will fit into these sorts of niches.

15.6.3 Web 2.0 is Taking Lead

Web 2.0 is the new talking point in online media. It enables users to play an active role in content creation. In the world of web 2.0, content power is not with media but with the masses. Web 2.0 provides the basic structure of participation, such as:

Architecture of participation: these are online facilities for user generated content such as .blogs, and wikis. The popular website based on web 2.0 is Wikipedia, where every registered user can contribute/edit/delete the content as per the existing Wiki community norms.

Crowd sourcing: this is a collaborative form of reporting where with the help of web 2.0 a group of people work together to gather information. Each contributor researches on a part of the overall piece.

By using these facilities websites following web 2.0 are trying to elicit more participation from its readers. These websites focus on submission of users, rather than staff reporters or editors. Such contents are gathered from a variety of online options: blogs, photos, podcast, video sharing, reviews, forums , etc.

The premise is that the group knows more than an individual at any point of time and new technologies are enabling such an effective form of collective and collaborative action. This is encouraging citizens to take active part in this new form of journalism. Besides, this will strengthen the democratic process as Beth Simone Novech argues that the way people are coming together, not just to create content, but also to create power.

15.6.4 Publishing Online has Become Easy

Publishing online has become easy with the advent of many online platforms and new technologies. Publishing content on blogs and social networking sites has become very common and popular among youth. On social networking sites too, the youth are dominating. Another new thing which is becoming common among youth is ‘mobile phone blogging’. This is location based instant blogging. They use their camera to shoot or click a photograph and post it instantly. It has made online journalism more competitive. Now the success of a website does not only depend on the quality of its own content but also on the gathering content online by following online platforms like blogs, micro blogging websites and social networking websites.

15.7 ONLINE JOURNALISM IN INDIA

The history of the internet is very short in India. It started in 1995 when Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd (VSNL) introduced internet in six cities in India. The first cyber cafe in India was launched in 1996 in Mumbai and in the same year rediff.com was launched. The first Hindi web portal in India named Webdunia was launched in 1999.

We all are aware that the Indian government has been trying to push internet access to the Panchayat level and has been also promoting computer literacy in the rural areas to implement the e-panchayats programme. In such a scenario, it is obvious that the number of internet users in rural India will go up manyfold in the coming years.

Hence, the future of internet journalism looks bright in India. More penetration of internet is bound to bring more users. So internet journalism in the country should be well prepared to serve the needs of people from different classes. Looking at the current situation however, it seems that internet has to cover a long way.

15.7.1 News Websites in India

Many news websites in India seem to be mere extensions of the prime media product (Newspapers or News channels) itself. Websites are created to carry detailed stories of a wide range filed by the reporters and editors of the newspaper. Quite a few independent sites are also operating, but their economic base is not very strong. Because of that limitation, they are unable to hire trained online journalists. They are still fully dependent on agency feeds and newspaper reporters. Maximum news channels have also their websites.

15.7.2 Blogs and Citizen Journalism Websites

Blog is an area with a separate identity. In India, the news value of blogs is very limited. Here, a majority of blogs are expression of personal opinion by the blogger or commentary on a certain issue, which can be highly subjective and biased.

Citizen journalism is an area where a person works on a report and puts it on the public domain. But in India this area is in a very nascent form and has a long way ahead. At present various news sites give them a separate specific designated space named citizen journalists.

15.7.3 Business Concern

It is also a well-known fact that globally online journalism has created its own niche space and it has made advertisements switch over. During the recent global melt down, while many newspapers in western countries got badly affected, the internet remained unaffected. Publishers in developed countries are debating over the adverse effects of internet over print business. But in India the scenario is quite different. Here, the circulation of some newspapers is increasing. Print managers are exploiting the new information and communication technologies and expanding their businesses. Many leading newspapers have come up with their local editions like Hindustan, Amar Ujala, Dainik Jagaran (Hindi newspapers), Hindustan Times, Times of India, the Telegraph (English newspapers) and so on. More and more readers are showing interest in local editions.

Print editions are also adopting new marketing techniques to tap more readers. Among the new marketing techniques are organising events and exhibitions for readers and offering gifts and discounts to subscribers. Such techniques seem to be increasing the visibility and circulation figures of the dailies. Hence, the print medium seems to have responded well to the changed circumstances. It has adopted the new technologies and increased its circulation. Statistics has shown that more and more readers are now preferring regional language newspapers and that may be one of the driving factors for many local edition of several newspapers coming up. Yet another factor could be the growing literacy rate among rural population.

15.7.4 Prospect of Online Journalism in India

Under these circumstances there is tussle between print and electronic media for greater portion of the advertisement pie. The online medium has not received priority yet. Advisers are willing to consider web edition to insert advertisements just as add-on in some of the websites of leading newspapers. This means that the web edition does not make substantial revenue to run a successful website.

Check Your Progress: 4

Note : 1) Use the space provided below for your Answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What is the present status of online journalism in India?

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15.8 SOCIALMEDIA FOR ONLINE JOURNALISM

Social networking sites provide online space where people can create their online profiles and update it with their activities. While doing so they can keep track of updates of their friends and family.

People can also engage in group activities and display feeds information to their home page. These feeds range from personal to news stories.

For journalists and news organizations it is a platform which can be used to connect with people to share and receive as much information as they can. Journalists can use this platform in the following ways:

- a. Online journalists can showcase their stories here. It is a platform where journalists can develop personal brands of themselves.
- b. Online websites can create their own page on social networking sites to share some of the important stories there. With help of this, a website can increase its traffic.
- c. Social networking sites can develop widgets and applications to give important news feeds customised to individual needs and demand. For example, hindustantimes.com has developed a special page named 'I love my Delhi' where they keep posting important news and activities in Delhi.
- d. Journalists can develop their own network to get information and some lead to an incident and make a comprehensive story. There are several examples where the news organizations received the first information through social media.
- e. Online news websites should not always try to post links only, they should also try to share something as small write-ups. This will be helpful in brand building.

15.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the key features of online journalism and its characteristics. We discussed the reporting format for online news media and methods for online story construction.

We came to know about the profiles of online journalists and trends in online journalism. Also, we discussed online journalism in the Indian context and the way of using social networking sites for online journalism.

15.10 KEYWORDS

Interactivity : is a kind of communication process that occurs between human being and computer systems. Based on a user's engagement, the computer respond to his/her demands, usually online media content is displayed based on a click/tap.

Scanability : the level of ability or skill for a person to read a portion of text. In online media, it refers to user's glancing through web content simultaneously scrolling the webpage.

WEB 2.0 : it refers to second stage of development in internet, mainly it denotes the changes in users' engagement with the internet (user generated content) and emergence of social media.

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15.12 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. It is available online and can be archived for easy access with added features of multimedia, immediacy and hyper textuality.

Check Your Progress 2

1. While creating online story one should try to make readers feel more informed, entertained and engaged. For that scanability and compact pages for online story should be ensured. Also, the story should have multimedia, tags/keywords, hyperlink based structure and interactive features.
2. Here in online news media all reporting processes are done online e.g. by using email and chats, interview is done, different websites are browsed to make observations. Open source reporting and distributive reporting are the main features of reporting for online news media.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Multi skilled professionals in online journalism provide quality work, showcase work in right way so that readers gain great experience, interacts with readers, help them to get complete picture of the story, plan ahead for the story and are poised during breaking news online.

Check Your Progress 4

1. Many news websites are mere extensions of the prime media product (Newspapers or News channels) itself. Websites are created to carry detailed stories on a wide range of issues filed by reporters and editors of the newspapers. Many independent sites are also operating, but their economic base is not very strong. Because of that they are unable to hire trained online journalists. They are still fully dependent on agency feeds and newspapers reporters. Many news channels have also their websites. But that is also to carry popular video clips on the websites.

