

Dizzying news cycle challenges media organizations

By Howard Kurtz, Newsweek

ABC's Martha Raddatz was minutes from taking off for Afghanistan when her BlackBerry buzzed with a colleague's message that Osama bin Laden might be dead. She dragged her luggage off the plane, sat down on the floor of Dulles airport, and started making calls.

It was 9:45pm on May 1 as the veteran correspondent, a phone in each hand, learned details—they had bin Laden's body!—that she provided on the air from Terminal C. She drove to the office at 3am and kept on working.

The network had run more than a dozen drills for precisely this moment. "News is the ultimate defibrillator for an organization," says ABC News president Ben Sherwood. "We get shocked to life and go right into action." The problem: after the Tucson shootings, the Egypt and Libya uprisings, the Japanese nuclear catastrophe, and now the death of the mastermind of 9/11, ABC has blown through most of its multimillion-dollar emergency fund set aside for unexpected events. That is rare and could force the network to ask the Disney bosses for more, though an executive says there is "no blank check."

Big media organizations pull out the stops for game-changing stories, but they may be bleeding themselves to death in the process. The lumbering old news dinosaurs have slashed their staffs and watched online rivals eat their lunch as ratings and circulation inexorably slide downward. There are fewer ambitious projects, reduced scrutiny of government, more journalistic recycling.

Brian Williams is proudly old-fashioned. Having landed in London for the royal wedding, he immediately flew home to chase the killer tornadoes in Alabama. The NBC anchor was in his Connecticut kitchen that Sunday night when White House spokesman Jay Carney called to say he should get to the chair: "Close hold: we got bin Laden. Tell no one."

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