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Radio station should get more than a reminder for `royal blunder`

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THE next time you listen to an important radio announcement, whether it is good news or of the death of a leader, be prepared to be told hours later that it is another human error.

And Malaysians are supposed to take this sitting down.

Human error is too rampant. From the newspaper vendor who unintentionally throws your morning paper into the drain to an enforcement authority which mistakenly blacklists you for crimes committed by others.

But to say that human error is the reason for the recent announcement by Radio Era of the demise of the constitutional head of the nation, is unacceptable.

There are limits bound by logic and the gravity of the error.

How can anyone, even if he is a rookie announcer or disc jockey, read unverified news.

An explanation of how or why this "royal blunder" happened has yet to be made.

A few entertainment writers say the announcer just read out a prepared script after receiving an anonymous phone call.

"We understand that he just read out a formatted announcement (which was prepared when the station learnt that the King was in Singapore seeking medical treatment) when an unidentified person called in with the so-called `latest news'," they say.

Can this error be overlooked?

If rumours rule the day, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would have died numerous deaths in the last couple of years.

From falling off a horse in Argentina to falling in his bathroom and falling critically ill upon setting foot on the Holy Land, the rumour-mongers have had a field day.

But did anyone with the right frame of mind buy their stories?

Yes, many in the newsrooms of various media organisations were similarly "informed" but they took the trouble to make verifications.

Imagine what would happen if a media organisation had announced, without verification, all the negative news which cropped up during the economic and political turmoil which hit the country a few years ago?

In the newsroom, there is little room for error. Publishing an unverified news item is a cardinal sin in journalism.

Common sense dictates that rumours must be verified with the relevant authorities.

Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, speaking at a media briefing a day after the Radio Era blunder, said the ministry does not want to make a fuss over the matter although there are clear guidelines on announcements concerning the monarch.

"We have been told that it was a genuine mistake," Khalil had said,

"The announcement was not based on any information but merely a prepared training module which accidentally went on air."

He added that the radio station had been reminded about the guidelines.

"It's now up to them (Radio Era) to apologise and settle the slip-up with the palace."

To the public, however, this is a big thing.

The King, after all, is the head of state, head of religion and the supreme commander of the armed forces.

If action against such grave mistakes are only reminders, can anyone be

assured that similar "human errors" will not recur?

When it happens again, all the announcer has to do is apologise and blame it on training modules or rumours.

No one is suggesting that Radio Era be closed down, but many feel the station should get more than a mere reminder on the guidelines.

Failing to adhere to the guidelines is serious, particularly for an organisation with direct access to the masses.

The consequences of some blunders can be dealt with. But some can lead to irreversible damage, especially if they touch on issues sensitive to the multi-ethnic society.

Officials should also be reminded that it is incumbent upon them to keep the public informed if the King, the Rulers of States and elected representatives fall ill.

Keeping the people guessing will only lead to speculation.

One needs no reminder that such speculation can even adversely affect the country's economy.