

“The media want greater engagement from politicians but I wouldn’t at this stage say the quality of debate is under threat” – Shobhana Bhartia

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On 13 October 2015 **Shobhana Bhartia**, Chairperson and Editorial Director of India’s largest listed media company HT Media Limited, participated in a [public conversation](#) about media and politics in contemporary India with Dr Mukulika Banerjee. During her visit to LSE, she spoke to Sonali Champion about the role of the Indian press in supporting democracy and how the media environment has changed since the BJP government came to power.



Click [here](#) to download the podcast or watch the video of the South Asia Centre event.

To start very broadly, how effective is the Indian media at promoting democratic debate?

The Indian media is the backbone in terms of protecting and constantly upholding democracy in every sphere of decision-making. Especially when leaders are pushed to the wall and things aren’t going that well, there is often an attempt to try and obfuscate, or avoid being held accountable. It is the media that constantly pushes and upholds a lot of the freedom and liberty in India.

How do you feel the media environment has changed since the new government came in?

We definitely want a far greater engagement, which is not happening. But neither is the converse true, the basic freedom of the press is not being challenged so I wouldn’t at this stage say the quality of debate is under threat.

That said, I think in every aspect the media definitely feels that there’s a certain reluctance by the government to engage with them. The new BJP media managers are very familiar with social media, but they use it as one-way communication. So we find that to be a slightly disturbing trend. What is also worrying is that appeals for RTI (Right To Information) get rejected, senior ministers are very hesitant about giving interviews, and the prime minister does not take the media with him for foreign tours. But equally I would say we do enjoy a lot of liberty in our country, and the media remains very frank and free.

How do the newspapers influence the debate if politicians are not actively engaging?

The government is a year and a half old and they feel at this stage that they really don’t need to engage, but that’s not to say that they are unaware of public sentiments as captured by the media, which works hard to give the public voice a platform. So in that way we are able to perform our task in highlighting the public mood, the issues that matter, or even turning the mood for or against a particular topic.

What is more, the government does respond to issues flagged by the media. It is just that this tends to be through one-way channels – their blogs or social media – so they can set the terms of engagement.

In a country as diverse as India how effective are the national newspapers are at covering a wide range of stories, especially outside the main metropolises?

As many people have said, India is many countries put into one. The priorities change, and very drastically, depending on the socioeconomic group that you’re targeting. So you frame your issues on the basis of that. For instance, some of the vernacular papers that we publish, they focus a lot more on issues that affect a person on a daily basis. They’re more interested in security, water, education, civic issues. You’ve got to prioritise and give them

what they're looking for.

On the other hand, for a paper like Mint, for instance, people want to know what was the last quarter growth? What is the RBI (Reserve Bank of India) governor going to do next? What are the interest rates going to be? In our country we still have the luxury of high readership but we no longer have the luxury of a one-size-fits-all approach. The media's become so competitive and everyone's trying to carve out a place and their own target audience. Of course the major news impacts everyone, so that is always there, but that could be a couple of stories. Beyond that that, the focus of, say, my Hindi paper will be vastly different to the focus on my English paper. Very often you read both to get a different flavour, coming from a different perspective.

Would you say Indian language newspapers cover regional politics more effectively than the big English-language papers?

Definitely because their narrative is totally different, they are covering a lot of the challenges and issues with far greater in-depth reporting than the national English language media. For instance, the national media tends to skim the surface, not because they are not important but because their readers perhaps don't want that much information.

To give you a quick example: 70% of our economy is agrarian but you'll hardly find a national newspaper writing about the challenges for crops and irrigation, or any other stories pertaining to how the transformation or modernisation has to happen. We have experts coming in and writing commentaries once in a while. It's a large issue for the bulk of India, but do we have it on a daily basis in the national newspapers? The answer is no.

And presumably the vernacular newspapers are quite important for strengthening local democracy?

Oh absolutely. And the regional papers hold a lot more credibility. Readers of national papers are slightly cynical, they have access to multiple sources of information and have very often formed their own opinion. But with readers of the vernacular papers the printed word is still like the gospel truth, and nobody is willing to believe that it might not be – they'll say in a very indignant way "but I read it in the paper!" That puts a huge onerous responsibility on publishers of these papers, although you still have many regional newspaper groups being a little gimmicky, and sometimes there are vested interests. So in smaller places, the Hindi heartland, the vernacular press still has a huge hold and therefore great influence to impact politics.

You've been credited with turning the Hindustan Times into an offering that is more accessible for younger audiences – how did you adjust your approach so effectively?

I was lucky to have a great team and perhaps my focus was single-minded in the sense that I had to turn the Hindustan Times around, to try and make it the newspaper of choice for the younger generation. At the time when I started working over 75% of our population was under the age of 35 and these were going to be my future readers. So we started trying to see how we could catch them young, not only by making the paper more accessible and interactive for young adults, but also by reaching out and connecting children to the brand when they were in school. We started something called PACE, which is a partnership for education. As part of this we provide a special paper to every school, for students who are class 6 and above and we hold events. So we start the bonding when they are still at a very young age so that, hopefully, when they grow up and become independent decision makers then their first choice might be the Hindustan Times.

And how do you find their interests contrast with the audiences you were catering to when you first arrived?

Very different. I got involved with the paper in the 1980s and at that stage the so-called 'senior generation' who were in their 50s and 60s dominated our readership. Firstly there was no other medium, it was only newspapers, even television only took hold very recently. When I first got into newspapers there were no private channels, there was only one state broadcaster.

The people who I was targeting at the beginning were people who had gone through India's freedom struggle, and their priorities were very different. It was about nation building, they were still looking at issues from a macro perspective. India was still struggling, it was an underdeveloped country. The newspaper had to partner the government in trying to set the agenda for this nation-building project. But India has come a long way since then and post-independence children have huge ambition. It's less to do with nation building; it's about here and now, what are the challenges? What do we want? Boundaries are more porous and people are no longer defining what they want in terms of what an Indian wants, but what a young global youth wants. Soft culture impacts everyone and the Indian youth are watching the same TV shows that may be broadcast in America, the same films, and therefore they develop similar aspirations. It's less about deciding what my 'Indian' audience wants, it's what the youth wants, and how do I engage with them and keep them hooked on to what I have?

You have been talking a lot about issues but it was very clear during the 2014 campaign that there was a strong focus on individuals, and this has been true with the Gandhi dynasty as well. Do you think the media is too focussed on personality politics?

I think that is responding just to the way in which politics has developed because the media has been focussing on issue. The Gandhi family is a different kind of an issue altogether because it seems that whatever happens they are there to lead the Congress, whether the Congress has 40 seats or 240. That doesn't matter. But Modi emerged through a certain process, and therefore the media obsession for him was very natural, this was a personality that was actually galvanising a party that in the not too distant past had just two members of parliament. If that individual had not appeared on the scene I don't think the party would have been galvanised into getting a complete majority.

It goes without saying that your focus does change when they are players like Modi, but this doesn't happen in every state. So for instance we are focussing a lot on the Bihar elections which are happening as we speak, and the BJP hasn't really yet come out with who is going to be the Chief Ministerial candidate, so the media is not focussed on personalities there. There could be umpteen names and a lot of guesswork is going on, but in the meantime we are raising issues important to Bihar, which have not been addressed. We are demanding answers as to how each party, each formation is going to respond to key challenges, and therefore giving our readers a more informed discourse before they decide who to vote for.

Do you think the Congress Party has an incarnation beyond the Gandhi dynasty?

It's all up in the air! It doesn't seem like there are any plans right now.

Click [here](#) to download the podcast or watch the video of Shobhana Bhartia and South Asia Centre Director Mukulika Banerjee debating the sensitive relationship between media and politics in contemporary society, weaving in Mrs Bhartia's personal experiences and the new challenges facing the media today.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Shobhana Bhartia is currently the Chairperson and Editorial Director at HT Media Limited, India's largest listed media company, part of India's Birla group. She was the first and the youngest woman to become the chief executive of a national newspaper in India.

In her career spanning three decades, she led the process of cultural transformation at HT Media, and converted it into a high quality, forward looking professional media organisation. She pioneered the strategy fundamental to the company's rapid growth and foray into education. Her efforts have contributed to the company winning global awards including the Best Media Company in India to Work For in 2012.



Shobana has received many awards and recognition for her achievements and was the Presidential nominee to the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Parliament in India from 2006-2012.

Sonali Champion is Editor of the South Asia @ LSE blog. She recently completed an MSc in Comparative Politics at LSE and also works at [Democratic Audit UK](#). She tweets [@sonalijcampion](#).



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