

# India's journalism – selling out?

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We had our first POLIS international event this morning. About a dozen of India's leading journalists joined me for a roundtable chat at the Taj Hotel, Delhi. Having Indian food for breakfast is not my usual routine and a power cut half way through added to the exotic flavour.

It was a fascinating insight in to what must be the world's fastest growing free media. Fascinating for what is different but also for a lot of what reminded me of debates back home and in California where I was last week. Basically, everyone is asking whether we are sacrificing good journalism on the altar of sales. In the UK and US it's in response to a decline in mainstream media revenues. In India it's a product of the chase for ratings and readers as their media market grows even faster than the national economy, which is itself expanding faster than anyone except perhaps China.

Mrinal Pande from the Indian Language Hindustan Times group of regional papers told us that their printing presses simply couldn't keep up with the demand for copies.

India now has 250 million newspaper readers – it now has 350 news channels – many 24/7 – and around 30 million people with internet access. But what's the journalism like?

Well my guests pointed out some worrying signs of dumbing down and selling out. India's most respected and most wealthy newsgroup, The Times of India, now sells editorial space to people who want their social or PR events covered as news. Nitin Desai, a former UN Under Secretary General told my meeting that this was "reprehensible". And even the Times man at the meeting, their highly innovative and insightful Inline editor Ranjan Roy, accepted that it was "indefensible".

TV journalism's biggest draw at the moment is "sting" TV where hidden cameras reveal petty corruption and criminality. Veteran journalist Paranjot Thakurta describes it as "dross on the box".

But this is all very familiar. In the UK there is exactly the same debate about whether we have the right mix between lifestyle and 'serious' journalism. I suspect that what we are finding out is that a new generation of consumers want both: they want journalism that looks at relationships and news that tells them the important things that are happening around the world. There are plenty of people in India, I was told, who want to know about Britney Spears. But with the Indian economy so bound up with the rest of the world, they also want to know about George Bush, too. The difference from the UK is that the Indian media is growing and their journalists have a chance to get the mix right in a market that is still evolving.

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