

'EDITORS AS POWERBROKERS'?

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The good news first. On the morning of November 26, the Foundation for Media Professionals (an independent, not-for-profit organization) decided it was time to break the polite silence and hold a panel discussion on the topic, 'Editors as Powerbrokers' at the India International Centre (IIC), Delhi. The Nira Radia tapes, whose transcripts were first published by *Open* magazine a week ago, was the trigger for the discussion. The panelists included editors from prominent print and electronic media houses.

The auditorium was packed. Clearly, the nexus between the media, politicians and PR honchos, as revealed by the transcripts, had shocked people enough to bring them out of the comfort of their homes to the venue.

Since *Open* hit the stands, and *Outlook* magazine followed its lead in printing the transcripts, the mainstream media has maintained a guarded silence on the violation of journalistic ethics the tapes revealed. Always voluble when it comes to the sins of politicians, the bureaucracy or the judiciary, dailies and magazines as well as shrill network anchors who enjoy playing god, have had very little to say after the transcripts were published. The discussion at IIC was meant to be an antidote to this insidious silence. If ever there was a place for straight talking, this was it.

Turns out this wasn't the case. The panelist who set the ball rolling had a strange caveat: let's not talk about Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi. Let's look at the larger picture, the corporatisation of the media on a country-wide level, the cosy relationships between editors and corporate houses, the boggling sums of money which change hands in exchange for slanted stories which espouse a corporate house's cause or build a corporate head's image.

Another panelist cooked up an odd metaphor to make sense of the demise of journalistic propriety. In her system of gradation (which didn't make any sense to the rest of the room), the transgressions of Mr Prabhu Chawla in this case were unforgivable, Ms Dutt's were inappropriate, and Mr Sanghvi's occupied a lower rung on 'the moral ladder'.

There was a half-hearted admission that the Lakshman Rekha had been breached. There was some talk about bringing in structural changes within media houses and the need for transparency in all financial matters involving corporate investment. The discussion muddled on, most of the insights as lukewarm as the winter sun outside.

The saving grace came later, after the forum opened up for audience interaction. Members of the audience expressed their views in no uncertain terms. A senior journalist who described herself as an 'old school, old professional' placed the blame squarely on the culture of subservience prevalent in media houses. Her tips for journalists who can't see straight: say no to putting a spin on your stories, no matter who orders you to do so. Don't crawl when you are asked to bend.

Another audience member raised a critical question about the Press Council of India (PCI) and its role in reprimanding the journalists who have been caught on tape. Is the PCI a toothless body? Isn't it expected to step in such situations? Valid questions, both.

The most thought provoking questions of the session were raised by an aspiring journalist and a teacher of journalism in the audience. Both said they were shocked, not just politely disturbed or mildly agitated by how deep the rot runs. "What should I tell my students in my lectures? How do I explain this to them?" the teacher wondered aloud. "How do you hang on to the fundamental ethics of journalistic practice when your editors keep rubbishing idealism as an impractical nuisance?" asked the aspiring journalist. □□□

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