

TOUGH CHOICE

## Persuasion, Radia style

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The Radia tapes are instructive textbook material for students of journalism and those of public relations, both taught these days by the same institutions. There are separate take-aways for the two kinds of professionals from the manner in which Ms Radia operated.

First, what journalists in the making can learn from the taped conversations? That one pair of industrialist siblings locked in rivalry can subvert every estate that matters: government, parliament, judiciary, press. The tapes are a vivid guide to who runs India, and where journalists fit into their scheme of things. Sometimes in a self-appointed way.

Lesson no. 2: The people who really run the country need journalists, albeit on their own terms, and understand the price of that.

Conversation between Niira Radia and Ratan Tata:

RT: Why isn't all this exposed?

NR: Ratan, they're buying up the media. They're using their buying power with the media. For very ad they place...I can't tell you the discussions I have had with the media, in particular the Times Group and Dainik Bhaskar—the Aggarwal guys who you met....

RT: Yes...

NR: They say, Niira, every time we do a negative story on them, they withdraw advertising. So, I said, fine, others can also withdraw advertising.... They leverage every dollar of their media spend to ensure they don't get negative publicity. The media is very, very greedy....

The 'they' in the first para is a reference to Anil Ambani, named earlier in this transcript. Why is he a 'they'? Because he has his own Niira Radia.

Lesson no. 3: If you are doing journalism in the big league you will encounter persuaders of either side, and will need to deal with them, if you want to know what is really going on in India that is Bharat. The biggies in the profession understand that. Every editor who counts in the English media, pink or white or electronic, pops up in the transcripts. Either being spoken to, or referred to as someone Niira will be meeting. Sometimes with a top Mukesh Ambani lieutenant. Every editor also understands that you need to meet them to get a fix on the issues.

Excerpt from conversation on Niira's phone with Manoj Modi, Mukesh Ambani's right hand man: Barkha to Manoj: "you please give him my regards, aur aap kabhi dilli aaye toh fursat mein, not that you have any thing like fursat, but if ever you.."

Manoj to Barkha: "no, no,no, you know I never come to Delhi, but I came only for this(?) last night, only for this purpose I have come."

Barkha to Manoj: It was very helpful Manoj, it was really very helpful.

Not just editors, also reporters. If you listen to the tapes carefully you also learn how to deal with the persuaders. Some swap information, some string them along, some just listen and probe, some want to help their mighty clients, or are eager to explain to Niira why they could not. Some offer advice on how to deal with their own publications:

MK: Objective advice. If CNBC carries it as a lead 10 times a day, then everyone will start running helter skelter. If I was the editor, Rohini's story was a clean Page 1, top half, like a lead story. Do you think a letter to the MD is possible? Broadly saying that concerned people congratulate the launch of ET Now and then you can raise this issue that there is this raging

controversy that is of national interest and you can take which is, you know, which is in keeping with what YSR Reddy has written.

(MK refers to MK Venu, currently editor of the *Financial Express*, then at the *Economic Times*.)

For those who want make a career in public relations the tapes are a complete manual of how-tos and how- not- tos.

Fundamental lesson no. 1: journalists need stories, their proprietors need ads. Learn to leverage both.

Lesson no. 2: Journalists like to persuade themselves that they are upholders of the national interest. Plug that line.

Prabhu Chawla: "You see when the brothers are involved, the nation also gets involved naa?"

Niira Radia: "Yaa, probably not a good thing naa. Not good for the nation."

Elsewhere too she has this lovely way of sounding like it's the nation she really cares about. "Just because two brothers are getting into an argument should the country suffer?"

Lesson no. 3: Know who your friends in the press are.

"We have to give the questions. With Vir we can manage whatever questions we want to ask." And have the brains to judge whom to keep your clients away from:

To M K Venu when at ET Now:

"Seriously Venu. You don't want to put Arnab on ET Now. He'll destroy it. Rahul, Ravi Dhariwal (CEO of Times group) I said it to. None of the CEOs want to go on an Arnab show. Vir is coming up with Tycoons. All my clients have a comfort factor with Vir.

Venu: Do they have a comfort factor with Karan Thapar?

Radia: Not at all. He is like Arnab.

"So now then it's fine. You tell Rahul (Joshi) now when Tata Power and Tata Chemicals and Nagarjuna Fertilizer file in court and there is something to write they won't give it to ET, if they are not going to carry the most critical part of the news. So you have a word with Rahul- won't give it to you if you don't want to carry that perspective."

or

"If you give it to Prabhakar Sinha will he give you front page. I need prominence for it. I can give it, but only if I get that commitment.

You need to deal with journalists of all levels but don't clutter your plate with the small ones.

Radia to someone in her team: "Nayantara etc. are calling. They should not start calling me for every story. Calls should come to you."

When the English press is not being helpful enough, flog the Hindi clippings.

Finally, there is one lesson Ms Radia's arch rival, the "Tony" of the tapes, could probably teach aspiring PR professionals better: Don't do so much of your wheeling and dealing on the phone. □□□