

# Examining the ethics of a suspect media

MANJUSHA MADHU 18th Sep

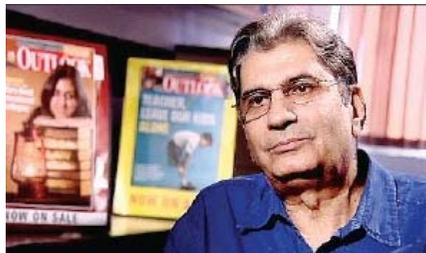
**T**in October 2009 prior to the state polls, three substantially similar articles praising the former Chief Minister Ashok Chavan came out in three rival dailies in Maharashtra. The incident marks the start of the paid news controversy that has eroded media credibility. Umesh Agarwal discusses this issue in his documentary *Brokering News* that was screened at the PSBT festival at the India International



Mrinal Pande

Centre last week. The film deals with media ethics and explores how 'the business of news' has replaced 'news'. It uses news reports, prime time TV, interviews with popular TV personalities and hard-hitting data to study the unholy nexus of corporates, politicians and the media. "The idea was not to point fingers but to raise a few questions. There have been instances where we can be proud of the media but it should not be only driven by commercial interests," Agarwal says.

The film shows how politicians broker coverage deals for fixed prices. For example, in the April 2001 assembly elections in four states and one UT, the Election Commission of India issued more than 200 notices against politicians for planting stories as news. However, not all politicians need to strike deals with media empires, many just own these companies. The film highlights this by citing Jayalalitha's Jaya TV and the Sun Network and Kalingnar TV of the Karunanidhi family.



Vinod Mehta

Treaties struck between media houses and corporate empires are another aspect the film examines. It talks about Times Group owner Benett Coleman's strategy of selling newspaper space for equity shares, a model being emulated by other media houses. Such partnerships ensure the companies get considerable reportage. In a brilliant caricature, the film shows Anil Ambani as a puppeteer



Shobhaa De

pulling the strings of various media figures. His Reliance Capital has investments in Network 18 and he also has holdings in the Sun Network and HT Media.

The documentary is replete with details on how the Nira Radia scandal involved the likes of Barkha Dutt, Vir Sanghvi and Prabhu Chawla, showing how big bucks flow in through

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shrewd manipulation. Statistics show that 27% of the 702 Indian channels are news channels, the highest in the world; however, most of these channels are running on huge debts. Despite this, more people like Manu Sharma's family are entering the business of news. This documentary successfully poses the question of how we will tackle this media circus.

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