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The Long Reach of India's TV News

Local Stories Reign In Booming Market

By Rama Lakshmi
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NEW DELHI -- Two weeks ago, a TV news channel here broadcast an exposé alleging that a math teacher at a local school had forced young girls into prostitution. The public reaction was swift and harsh: Within an hour, hundreds of enraged parents had stormed the school and a crowd had found the teacher, ripped her clothes and beat her.

The mob then went on a rampage, damaging vehicles and blocking traffic for several hours in the capital. The teacher was suspended and a state probe was ordered into the allegations made in the exposé, though police later said they believed the story had been staged.

Such is the emerging power of TV news in [India](#), where there has been an explosion in the growth of 24-hour news channels in the past two years.

For the first time, much of the growth has been in Hindi-language channels, such as the one that broadcast the recent exposé. Meanwhile, many of the channels are challenging traditional elitist notions of what deserves to be on the air and bringing legitimacy to local stories that previously would not have been covered.

In one case recently, a TV channel broadcast shocking images of a policeman tying a suspect to a motorcycle and dragging him around town. Within hours, the officer was suspended and an investigation ordered. In another case, a TV report about a cobra that tried to attack a 12-year-old boy became a national phenomenon last year, attracting millions of viewers.

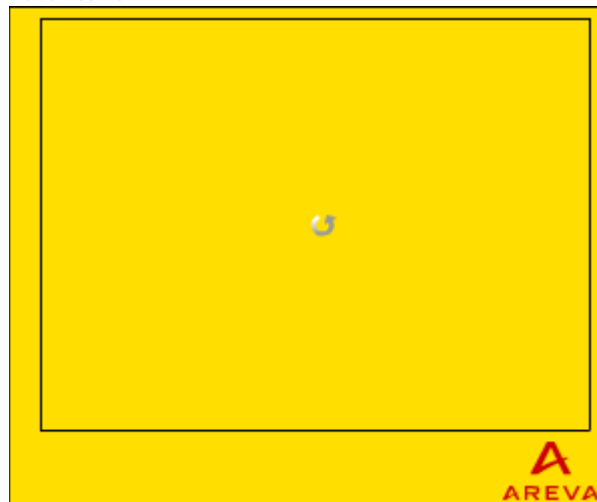
"TV news is possibly the biggest form of reality show to hit India, whether it is a sting operation, or a boy who falls into a well, a snake's revenge or a domestic quarrel," said Sundar Raman, managing director of MindShare, a media research group. About 120 million Indian homes have a television, and the media market overall is growing at about 19 percent annually.

"News is the fastest-growing genre on Indian television, much more than entertainment," Raman said.

TV news was opened to private players a little more than 10 years ago, after five decades of state control. Today, India has 60 news channels in 16 languages, and the number is expected to double in the next two years.

Analysts say India's diversity of languages and cultures, coupled with burgeoning economic growth in small towns, is driving the boom. New channels in Hindi and regional languages are reaching beyond the English-speaking middle class of large metropolitan cities. This year, regional language channels grew by 20 percent, attracting local, first-time advertisers.

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The Business Standard, an Indian financial newspaper, has called the boom the "channel gold rush." Print media, politicians and business people are all seeking ways to get involved in the growth. So, too, are entrepreneurs with no experience in the TV industry.

Madhur Mittal, a third-generation home builder and an automobile dealer from the northern city of [Agra](#), said he wants to set up four news channels by next year.

"The whole push is to go local, to the smaller towns. To be successful, you have to wear their clothes and speak their language and deliver news that is relevant to them," Mittal said.

The low cost of setting up TV stations is also helping fuel the surge.

Seven years ago, it cost about \$10 million to set up a national 24-hour news channel, according to Sanjay Salil, who heads MediaGuru, a consultancy that has helped set up seven low-cost news channels in [South Asia](#). Today, it costs about \$7 million.

Regional channels are even cheaper to set up, at about \$4 million. "And they break even in just two years," Salil said.

The rush to capture small-town audiences is also affecting news content. Stories that are hyper-local or sensational, which never would have made it on to the air, are now finding audiences in small towns where the appetite for news about Parliament or government policies is limited.

"The stories of the snakes, ghosts and the witches have always been there in India. What was folk, private and obscure has now been brought into the open by TV, and it appeals to the small town. Culture and market are being tied together very cleverly by TV channels," said Shiv Visvanathan, a social scientist at the Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology. "TV news is creating a new myth of mobility for the small towns."

Critics have accused TV news channels of preying on people caught in traumatic circumstances. A man in the northern state of [Punjab](#) recently set himself afire in front of TV cameras to protest a government policy, sparking criticism that media workers should have rushed him to the hospital. Five demonstrators who consumed poison a month ago, to protest a government drive to evict them from their shops, were encouraged to do so by two TV reporters, according to police.

A new documentary film, "Grabbing Eyeballs: What Is Unethical About News Television," examined recent TV coverage of some popular events and blamed TV channels for "lowering standards" and neglecting "basic ethical norms."



The government wants to establish a code of ethics, but the nascent television news industry is wary of allowing its newfound independence to be stifled. Supporters argue that TV news has ceased to be elitist and is empowering Indians living on the margins.

"If people in positions of authority are completely deaf to your grievances, there is an accessible alternative now. You can call your local news channel and they will come to you. The officials listen if it is on TV," said Uday Shankar, who heads Star India, which offers a number of news and entertainment channels.

"People may rubbish it as drama, as reality TV," Shankar added. "But Indian TV news industry is still a toddler who sometimes runs, sometimes trips."

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