

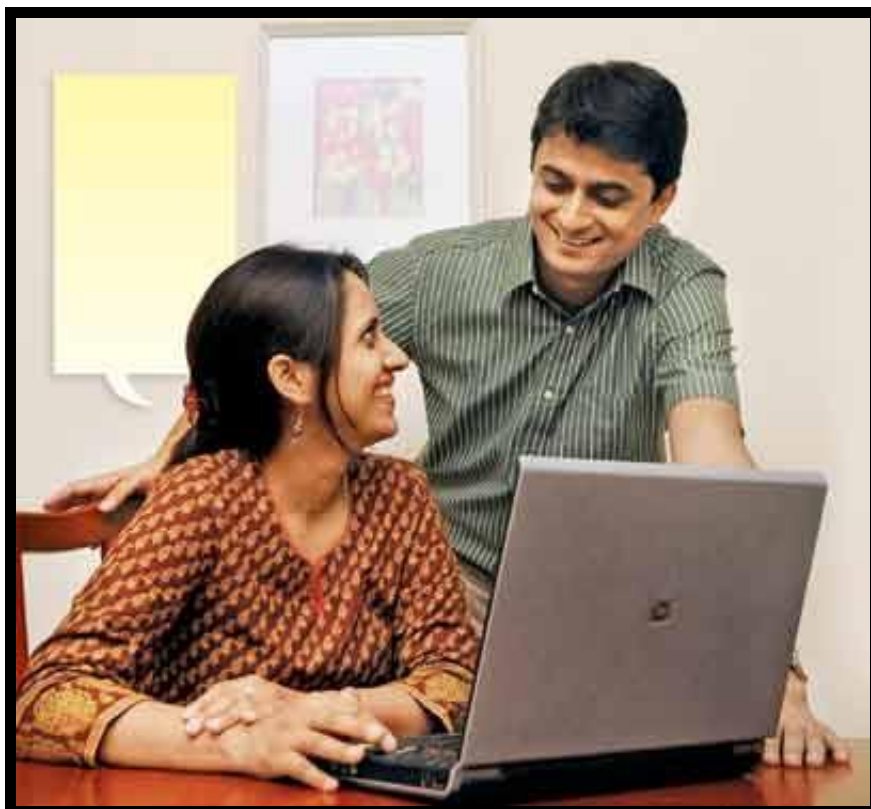
The good news journal

By: Yolande D'Mello

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If you thought gore, grime and voyeurism sold, meet new media players in the Indian market who want to make some money and a lot of noise about 'happy' stories unfolding across India

On the 4th of this month, Talbehata, a town council in Lalitpur district, one of the poorest in Bundelkhand, made it to the front page. The story was about Voice of Talbehata, a simple initiative launched by Nagar Panchayat chairman Mukta Soni to set up an effective means of communication through 225 speakers mounted on electric poles scattered across the town council.



*Civil engineer who quit her job in real estate to work full-time with the [betterindia.com](http://www.betterindia.com), an online news portal she launched with her husband Dhimant (right), to explore inspiring stories from across the country.
Pic/ Satish Badiger*

What started as one-off messages relayed from a control room at the centre of the council, has now turned into an indispensable network of communication for the village's 25,000 locals who are informed about tips on preventing the onset of seasonal diseases, unexpected changes in weather, altered train schedules, information about lost and found items, messages from the police, and data on government schemes.

An inspiring read to start your day with; except that it didn't appear in a mainstream newspaper. In fact, that morning, the country's leading daily ran four stories on page 1 -- Petrol up by Rs 1.8, Court refuses bail to Kanimozhi, Spot-fixing lands Pak trio in jail -- all of them, grim.

"We are aware of the poverty, violence and crime that's infecting the world, but there are so many people out there working to better the situation. We grew tired of corrupt politicians and everyone else who didn't deserve to hog the limelight in newspapers," says Anuradha Parekh, co-founder of positive news portal www.thebetterindia.com, that ran the Talbehata story.

The 31 year-old civil engineer quit her job in real estate to work full-time for the portal she launched with husband Dhimant. What started as a blog back in 2008 is now a busy portal that receives 12,000 page views a day. Parekh likes looking at life sunny side up. Raising a two year old in the big bad world can be a scary thought, she admits, but Parekh chooses to look at the good unfolding around her and find ways to document and share it. As a reader, she says she wondered why stories of change and heroism never made it to the newspaper that lay on her breakfast table each morning.

And it's not just readers who are looking for change. News media professionals too feel the same way. PC Vinoj Kumar has been a journalist for 15 years. Having worked with MiD DAY, Mumbai's leading tabloid, followed by a five-year stint with the news magazine Tehelka, he could have landed a fancy mainstream editing post.

Instead, the 42 year-old chose to found The Weekend Leader, a news website that focuses on positive journalism. "I've been in the industry long enough to know what the pressure is like. You are bombarded with news through wire and news agencies, and there is always too little a space to say it all. We carry a barrage of newsbreaks but there are hardly any follow-ups. At the start of your career you are driven by the thrill of seeing your byline in print. But gradually I found myself wondering, what is my contribution?" says Kumar, who brings you stories of 'Good people, change agents and unsung heroes'.

His hero for this week is 24 year-old Anil Chauhan, a Hindu calligrapher from the Moosa Bowli neighbourhood of Hyderabad who taught himself calligraphy and Urdu for four years to be able to paint Quranic verses across the city's mosques with a modest reed pen. The messenger of peace's service is free, and instead of money, he asks mosques for a few words of appreciation on paper.

For those who dismiss the portal launched in 2010 as one that carries 'light' news, Kumar says, "It's not happy soft news, it's news with a positive impact. While a mainstream newspaper might choose to simply report a catastrophe, we will talk about the people working to set things right in the aftermath."

Kumar, who puts out the news on his site with a team of freelance journalists stationed across the country, was aware that happy news wouldn't necessarily translate into big bucks. "I put in some money, and we rented a small office in Chennai. I worked with the contacts I had and the support was encouraging. We thought we'd manage with corporate support, but the response has been slow. We will be hiring professionals to handle fund raising now," he says. The Weekend Leader runs on revenue generated from advertising on the site, and had over 800 fans on its Facebook page within its first ten months of business.

The Parekhs are also aided by a team of stringers and volunteers working with social initiatives in and around Chennai, Mumbai and Bengaluru. "We want to project India in a good light. We enjoy covering projects that are working towards environmental conservation, developmental initiatives, steps taken in the area of heritage, social service and travel that haven't been talked about," says Parekh over the phone from her at-home office at Kodihalli, Bengaluru.

Page views may translate to sustenance, but for Parekh, the real measure is the number of people she is able to inspire. "This Diwali, we ran a campaign to donate solar lamps to underprivileged students. Each cost Rs 399. It was a story I worked on with V-Shesh Foundation, a Chennai-based non-profit trust that connects organisations to rural markets, and youth and women to income opportunities. Their target was to donate 5,000 lamps, and we were able to help them achieve it."

While good news portals have found a footing in India only recently, it's a tried and tested formula in the West. Headquartered in London, OptimistWorld.com was launched in 2008 by Achim Kram, a business

manager who wanted to "cheer people up and show them that it's not all doom and gloom out there". The journey has been successful for Kram. "I felt that the tone the media was adopting was negative. Several people told me how they had stopped watching the news or that they hesitated to read the papers because they were depressing.

Besides, I realised that smaller to medium-sized charities needed a voice. Many of them are achieving great results but the mainstream media doesn't pick up their stories, unless celebrities are involved. I wanted to give the smaller players an opportunity to raise their profile. And we have been able to do it for over 250 organisations," says Kram over email. With a following of over 5,00,000, the Optimist World attracts 45 per cent male readers, while the rest are women.

No news is not necessarily good news, says Mumbai-based veteran journalist PK Ravindranath. Former press advisor to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, and teacher at six colleges across the city, Ravindranath says. "The dominance of stories attuned to the rich and not the common man, which is what journalism was intended to do, the control of big barons over leading newspapers and the dearth of committed journalists who seem to be moving to news magazines, are the main reasons for the distortion of a value system in mainstream press."

On the day the much-hailed Buddh International F1 circuit was inaugurated in Greater Noida, most major newspapers went gaga over how India has embraced an opportunity for redemption after the Commonwealth Games fiasco. On the same day, observes Ravindranath, business tycoon and philanthropist Azim Premji's foundation announced a plan to start two free schools in every district of the country. "There are 650 districts in India. The implications on the number of children who will receive an education is huge. How many papers ran it as page 1 lead?"

Newspaper bans 'bad' news for a day

Croatia's first daily tabloid that launched in 2005, rounded off 2010 with a decidedly unorthodox, yet upbeat approach to reporting. For one day, 24 Sata banned all negative stories, publishing only pieces with an optimistic slant. The paper, with a circulation of about 1,50,000 copies, took the step to counter a spate of grim national news, including accounts of political corruption and crime that had gripped the country. A large smiley face beamed at you from the front page of the daily, and inside lay stories about dog rescues, a barber who regularly gives orphans a complimentary trim, and examples of entrepreneurs who have defied the global crisis. It even went as far as to make sure that every horoscope for each of the 12 zodiac signs promised unbroken happiness.

Readers want papers to make them smile

As a student of journalism, I was taught that we read news to find out about all the bad things out there that are NOT happening to us. Newspapers thrive on ill fate and sorrow. And their definition of happiness is celebrity hokum. But honestly, it would be great to read a happy journal. Whether I will stop reading my daily news, I can't guarantee. But I would surely pick up a feel-good journal.

Madhura Haldipur, 22, writer

The Mayans predicted the arrival of D Day in 2012. Our newspapers are in a race to get there faster. News is not only about death, murder and lawsuits. There is a lot of positivity that needs to be highlighted. A website that offers good news will be a refreshing and welcome change.

Kartik Chaturvedi, 21, business and marketing associate