

Investing in news, investigating the truth against odds, tenacious reporting from small towns: Highlights from [The Media Rumble 2018](#)

- *“You have the right to critique religion”, said fearless Bangladeshi writer Rafida Bonya Ahmed*
- *Sessions covered a wide range of topics including a masterclass on verifying photos and videos*

New Delhi. 04.08.18. Engrossing debates, discussions and conversations at the international news forum, The Media Rumble, brought to the limelight, the immense number of challenges faced in journalism, the long road still ahead and the critical need to scale up. Conceived by the news and media critique website, NewsLaundry, and produced by pioneering entertainment and arts company Teamwork Arts, the second edition of the forum featured some of the most experienced news professionals from across India and the world.

Why do people invest in news? Is it viable and worth the risk? **News as Investment** featured **Roopa Kudva**, partner at Omidyar Network, in conversation with **Suresh Venkat**, former Technology Editor with CNBC TV18. Roopa Kudva spoke about the philosophy behind Omidyar’s investment in independent media. She said, *“At an early stage in investing, we make investments based on assumptions on the outcomes. There will be political risks; we deal with that by following the law of the land and we absolutely believe in the power of independent media.”*

Moderated by **Atul Chaurasia**, Executive Director of NewsLaundry, the panel **Mufassil Patkar Aur Unke Sangharsh** brought to the forefront, stories of tenacious journalists in small towns, who take the highest risk to produce the least recognized work. **Malini Subramaniam**, an independent journalist covering news from Bastar, said, *“Urban Naxal naya shabd banaya gaya hai. Jab bhi koi Dalit ya adivasiyo ke paksh me baat karta hai, toh use urban Naxal ghoshit kar jail me daal diya jaa raha hai (The word ‘urban Naxalite’ has been coined for a specific purpose and anyone who speaks pro-Dalit or pro-tribal is declared an urban Naxalite and imprisoned.)”* The panelists shared the threats they faced in their day-to-day jobs. **Narendra Yadav**, who was behind the expose of Asaram Bapu, revealed the hardships he faced: from attacks to his caste and religion, raking up his nationalism to the lure of money and finally attempts on his life. None of these deterred him and journalism’s victory lies in the fact that Asaram is finally in jail.

In **Facebook’s Journey with News Publishers**, **Campbell Brown**, former TV anchor for NBC and CNN and currently Global Head of News Partnerships – Facebook, focused on the social media giant’s role in modern news-dissemination and how that affects India in particular. In 2018, rampant and dangerous false news campaigns, and the recently exposed breaches in its data privacy have devalued the efficacy of the platform and left Facebook with a tough task ahead: becoming a watchdog of the news shared on it. Brown stressed on the need to verify all content through user

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surveys and by partnering with fact-checking organisations. Facebook, she said, is 'very serious' about how it addresses the rising impact it has on elections, people's safety and privacy, but reminded audiences that its primary focus remains on being a space for 'free speech' and social interaction.

Fighting Machetes with a Pen had committed writer and activist Bangladeshi-American author **Rafida Bonyah Ahmed**, whose husband Avijit Roy was hacked to death by machete-wielding Islamic extremists while they were visiting Dhaka on a book-signing trip, in conversation with senior journalist, columnist and blogger **Kanchan Gupta**. She spoke passionately of her disquiet about the rise of religious extremism and censorship in Bangladesh and remarked that religious fractiousness is injected very strategically in the country by those in power for purely self-driven ends. She spoke candidly about the extra-judicial killings that have become common, and that religion, politics and class issues are all related and have to be talked about in the public space. Having faced the brunt of Islamic fundamentalism in 2015 in Dhaka, she said, *"Religion is a problem. It propagates hate and divisions. We should have the right to criticize religion. You don't pick up machetes, you pick up the pen. I see the hunger for change. I still see hope."*

The pressures of running a news organization were up for discussion in the next session, **Ownership Responsibilities**. The panel, moderated by **Madhu Trehan**, had **Anant Goenka**, Wholetime Director and Head, New Media, at The Indian Express and **Aroon Purie**, Editor-in-Chief and Chairman of the India Today group. They discussed the huge responsibility that owners of news organisations have upon them to fend both governments and corporates, and yet having to strike the right balance between reporting hard fact and sustaining consumer interest. Purie was clear that journalists didn't have anything to worry as long as they could defend their stories with the dignity of sound data. He cautioned however on reporters and news-gatherers fraternizing too closely with politicians which could make brutally frank reportage complicated.

Second Citizens featured **Neha Dixit**, an award-winning independent journalist who covers gender and social justice in South Asia; **Nishtha Satyam**, Deputy Country Representative for India at UN Women; **Ravish Kumar**, anchor and senior executive editor at NDTV India, and lawyer, researcher, and human and women's rights activist **Vrinda Grover** in conversation with **Nayantara Rai**. The panel went beyond the standard gender debate into specific issues like cyber-bullying of women journalists, inequality in workplaces and how news media treats women, both as news-creators and consumers. Nishtha voiced the need for news reportage to be gender-sensitive and for media to realize that stories like demonetisation or the National Register of Citizens affect women equally if not more. The panel agreed that while much is being done to make newsrooms more sensitive to sexual violence and harassment, in the online space, women journalists are specifically targeted by trolls and other groups with sexual, personal and extremely violent threats and there was urgent need for efficient law-enforcement against the chilling reality of online-bullying.

Should **Investigative Journalism** be a priority, if it has high risk, high cost and high chances of failure? **Sreenivasan Jain**, Managing Editor of NDTV, pointed out that investigative reportage adds huge credibility and brand value to an organization which matter in sales pitches. **Jay Mazoomdar**, currently with The Indian Express' global investigations team looking into the Panama and Paradise Papers, said that while the cost of investigative journalism is often prohibitive, it is the reluctance to carry a story that would offend those in power that is the greater problem. Sreenivasan admitted "In

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India, we don't have the money or the freedom to really crack down on powerful syndicates. The consequences here of offending powerful people are very real."

In **Neta>Abhineta**, a conversation debating whether political cinema is possible in India, several viewpoints came across where **Anurag Kashyap** mentioned that while it is possible to make political cinema, things like censorship cuts, bans and the protests that it garners, make the process tedious. *"It's not that if I wanted to make political cinema, I wouldn't do it because of the fear of censorship, but it's the process of fighting it which scares me. You can't just give up at the first level – you have to go through many levels, the executive committee, the revising committee, the tribunal, and maybe even all the way to the Supreme Court in the end. But the thing is, the most restrictive regimes in the world come out with the best films,"* he said. **Rajiv Menon** pointed out that political cinema is not necessarily unviable or unaccepted and in Tamil Nadu, the maximum political action has resulted because of cinema. He also highlighted how recent films like fellow panelist **Meghna Gulzar's** Raazi have received much acclaim.

The last day of The Media Rumble featured masterclasses and presentations on a wide range of topics. The masterclass on **How to Verify Photos and Videos** by **Surabhi Malik**, Google News Lab Teaching Fellow in India, was well-received and relevant in this age of volatile fake news.

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NOTES TO EDITORS**ABOUT NEWSLAUNDRY**

NewsLaundry is India's first completely subscription-driven, independent news media company. NewsLaundry has been at the forefront of free speech advocacy and the need for an independent news model and a free and accountable press. Over the past few years, NewsLaundry has been committed to presenting current affairs stories in innovative and engaging formats which include news critique, reporting, documentaries, podcasts, animation and comics. NewsLaundry has been awarded the 2016 Ramnath Goenka Award for Investigative Journalism for its series on politicians misusing advertising funds of public sector companies for patronage.

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ABOUT TEAMWORK ARTS

For over 25 years, Teamwork Arts has taken India to the world and brought the world to India. In countries such as Australia, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Israel, Korea, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK and USA, Teamwork Arts produces over 25 highly acclaimed performing arts, visual arts and literary festivals across more than 40 cities.

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Teamwork Arts produces one of the world's largest free literary gatherings, the annual ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival, international festivals Shared History in South Africa, Eye on India in the United States of America, India by the Bay in Hong Kong, and many more.

Website: <http://www.teamworkarts.com>

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