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India aims for global soft-power clout via Republic TV

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Barring the occasional foreign policy or terrorism-themed panel discussion and live coverage of seminal global events such as the US elections, India's TV channels have not focused on global current affairs. Photo: Reuters

But there has never been one dedicated to world news and analysis.

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Now a new initiative called Republic TV, bankrolled by the nationalistic Indian politician and media baron Rajeev Chandrasekhar, stands the best chance to break the inertia and enter the big league in the world news business. Led by the larger-than-life celebrity editor Arnab Goswami, who is India's feistiest journalist in the English language, Republic TV has billed itself as a global media entity "parallel to the BBC and CNN", and is scheduled to start telecasting soon.

Given Mr Goswami's right-of-centre personality and inclination, Republic TV might more accurately be compared to the American Fox News channel. That may not be a bad thing because Fox's reach and ability to shape minds have been nothing short of extraordinary.

For a country that wishes to shape the world in the 21st century, expressing what India stands for on any given global news event is essential. Mr Goswami's quest for a truly "independent Indian voice" that is informed and opinionated about everything international — from the United States' charging the Vice-President of Venezuela with drug trafficking to Russia extending asylum for whistleblower Edward Snowden — is the need of the hour.

Before this, barring the occasional foreign policy or terrorism-themed panel discussion and live coverage of seminal global events such as the US elections, the visit of a foreign dignitary to India, or the outbound travels of the Indian Prime Minister, India's TV channels have not focused on global current affairs.

This neglect springs from a belief that domestic news, especially India's soap opera-style political party tussles and scandals, sells while foreign stories have a limited market and cannot generate revenue.

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Many Indian editors give the excuse that Indians who wish to watch world news can turn to international channels anyway.

Until now, the nearest an Indian TV outlet has come to being international is WION (World is One News), which started airing in 37 countries last year. But this venture, backed by India's Essel Group, has not picked up momentum and is hardly known to audiences. Its liberal philosophy of presenting international breaking stories from a "South Asian perspective" rather than an Indian one has not caught on. The low-profile channel lacks resources and skilled researchers to be able to gain traction as a global channel.

A global channel for a rising India

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A dramatic and rhetorically powerful figure, Mr Goswami is seen by media insiders and the general public as someone authentic who walks the talk and lives up to his word come what may.

But the real challenge for his new enterprise is to replicate his enormous success in domestic news and home viewership on the international stage.

For any Indian channel to go global, much depends on how broadly knowledgeable, articulate and sophisticated its crew is about what is happening in countries far and near in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and Australia.

Today, there is no dearth of world news channels, including Al Jazeera from Qatar, Russia Today, CCTV of China and Channel NewsAsia of Singapore.

These later entrants have expanded the ideological and geographical scope of understanding the world beyond the Western mouthpieces like the BBC, CNN and France 24.

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Any Indian wannabe channel in this sector must quickly establish an identity that is unique and recognisable.

If Republic TV will brandish excessive Indian nationalism, could it repel neutral foreign audiences who may not resonate with chest-thumping Indian and India-sympathising foreign anchors and correspondents?

In the present global political milieu where nationalistic politics has staged a comeback and is pushing back against excessive cosmopolitan fuzziness, Republic TV may actually be in sync with the zeitgeist.

The basic premise of an Indian world news channel is that Indians can comment fearlessly about the behaviour of world powers and transnational corporations.

It can also project a distinct line (not necessarily dovetailing that of the Indian government) which ultimately serves India's aspirations to be recognised as a great power on par with China and the US.

An Indian version of a CNN International or Fox News will win more than eyeballs. It would earn followers and help India shape international public opinion to counter threats to its rise.

Should Republic TV deliver the goods, soft-power benefits will flow to India as an open and argumentative society bringing its distinct non-Western narrative to illuminate the world's problems and offer solutions.

In the global information arena, India has thus far remained backward. A revolution is asking to happen.

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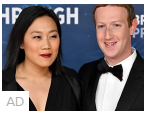


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