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Radha

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Hi Rukmani Welcome to the Mrigishira, thanks for doing this podcast with us.

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Rukmani

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Thanks so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

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Radha

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I just want to ask you about the book, you know, data journalism, basically, what prompted you to write it? And what are some of the key takeaways ,one can expect a reader can expect from the book.

R

Rukmani

0:49

Yes, thanks for that so I've been a journalist for a while now since 2004. But one of the things that I realized is that I ended up having a sort of path with two directions to it. One was my journey as a field reporter from 2004 to 2008 or so. And then my sort of specialization in data journalism from 2010 onwards. And one of the things that I noticed is that some of these experiences tended to be very separate from each other, the world of field reporting and the world of data journalism. And in a way, the reason that they sort of were separate from each other, was also because of the way data and stories interact with each other in all of our communication, not just in journalism, which is, we often tend to keep them quite separate from each other. They're often practiced by very different sets of people they often don't talk to each other. And as a result, what we ended up having is an incomplete sort of picture. So the idea from the book was to pull together both my experiences as a field reporter, as well as what I have found that good data can really tell us about India, and to sort of combine these two sets of information to tell us a more complex, complicated, and perhaps even a more messy version of the story of India that we know of until now. Because I suppose my thesis in a way really is that India is complicated, India is messy. And Journalism and Communication really misses that. So some of the things that you can expect to find from the book are sort of reality checks or surprises about the country that you might not know of, because of the sort of worlds and bubbles that we often operate in me included but these are things that data has shown me, for example, just how small the Indian middle class is, for example, and just how many of us actually occupy the very small sort of upper extreme of the country that we typically imagine is an elite, but actually really includes you know, you and me, and perhaps many of your listeners as well. Another sort of surprising takeaway, I imagine for most listeners, and readers will be around views of the country around sort of issues around religion and caste, which I found to be far more conservative than many people imagined to be about India, you'll also find interesting insights about crime, politics, the economy, the world of work, help women, these are sort of some of the big areas that I've worked on. And what you can expect to find is a combination of data hopefully told in an engaging manner, because that is, you know, the sum total of what I tried to do, and stories that will really make you think twice, hopefully, about India.

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Radha

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You said you were a field journalist for a couple of years, and then you got into this. So what prompted you to because most of the times, as reporters, the path one takes is not the kind of path that one would look at, which is more analytical, which is more, you know, sort of assessment oriented, etc, right? I mean, the child so what prompted you to get into data journalism?

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Rukmani

4:33

Now, that's a great question. And in essence, my answer lies partly in your question, which is, it was exactly this sort of quest to be able to be more analytical, more rigorous, that that drove me towards data. I had been a field reporter for a while in Mumbai, and then I, you know, went off to the UK to do a master's degree, and for the first time, I came across rigorous research and statistics around South Asia and India. And it really struck me that I had not been using such research in my journalism, and that, you know, reporting would benefit from this upon my return. So when I returned, for example, one of the first stories I did at the time, because in 2010, if you remember, you know, we had this escalation in the prices of food, including the oil, for example, and I was sent off to booth, they'll come to do reporting around food insecurity. And one of the things that really struck me then was that now I knew that there was so much data around food that I could incorporate into my reporting, I knew that there were big international reports around about food insecurity compared across countries, I knew we had indicators around, say, you know, stunting and malnourishment. I also knew that we had things like retail and wholesale prices of goods, all of which I had not sort of used before, not because it wasn't being done in journalism, but because it was sort of being kept separate from what we called as the reporting. So that was really the idea to incorporate all of this rich information that was being produced into full theory reporting to give more context, and, you know, provide a more whole picture. This also ended up being something that became quite important around elections, because one thing we all I think, in the media certainly sensed from readers around that time, was that there was this frustration among readers about how political journalism was being done this sort of very, he said, he said, kind of reporting without any sense of, Well, what's the reality here? What did the numbers really show. And I think that's something that began incorporating numbers and statistics, especially around development indicators and the economy, into news reporting around political journalism and elections. And then I've been glad to see that in the last 10 years or so this sort of mindset is really more of a mindset and the technical aspect of it alone. So this sort of mindset of incorporating numbers into the regular reportage has extended into all sections of news reporting. It's not, you know, restricted to the economy or to politics anymore.

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Radha

7:12

But what has also happened, I guess, is that, you know, more the information that is available today. There's also less of credibility, and, you know, listen for authenticity. And, you know, there's a lot of fake news. And then there are sites, which sort of, you know, talk about whether this is fake or not fake, and things like that. So, so how do you see this kind of worse scenario?

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Rukmani

7:53

I think that's very important and very central to the thinking around journalism, information communication that we have to have over the next few years now. And yes, one of the things that really struck me in the reception to my book, which is when I go out into events and talk to people, particularly younger people is this great concern around disinformation,

misinformation, fake news, credibility, and trying to figure out how to authenticate news. So yes, you know, there's great work being done by fact checking organizations, but I do worry sometimes that in a way, we have become so polarized that, you know, just as you can select the news, the information that you want, that confirms your biases, you are almost able to now select the data that you want to confirm your biases, you may even be able to select the fact checking website that you want to confirm your biases. So I do want to sort of be circumspect about this and not place data on such a pedestal that it that there is some sort of expectation that data alone or data journalism will pull us out of this crisis of credibility that we find all communication in? Yes, I would like data to be part of the solution. And I do hope to think about ways to be part of the solution, whether it means better numerical literacy in people, especially women, right, from a young age and right from villages onwards to make sure that they are better able to pass the information they receive and less likely to be sort of deceived by numbers, whether it means greater honesty about sources and a greater sort of hunger, appetite demand among readers to see the source information behind claims being made. I hope, you know, this sort of culture of demanding accountability grows. So I don't believe that data will solve this issue. But I do want to think of ways to make data part of the solution.

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Radha

9:57

Interesting that you pointed out about You know, crediting the two sources and greater accountability, per se, in in the profession. Because sometimes I guess it's easy to, you know, mask the source or not, quote the source.

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Rukmani

10:27

Absolutely. And I think, you know, being part of engendering a sort of culture of making that unacceptable, is, is a great direction to think of moving forward and sort of even right from journalism schools, and you know, in newsrooms making it and an essential practice that even if you're not doing data, whatever part of journalism you are involved in, being very upfront about sources should be really the starting point.

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Radha

10:57

How can, let's say, a corporate or a brand, for example, make it part of this how can digital journalism or data oriented storytelling be part of the technique?

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Rukmani

11:38

Yes, sir, I'd really love to, you know, think more about this and see more of it in all of our communication, not just journalism, in communication from corporate says, Well, I think the sort of orientation and mindset, which is that numbers and data told, communicated in an engaging fashion should be an essential part of storytelling is really a takeaway for all sorts of people trying to communicate information, not just journalists, I think the same sort of hunger for information for credibility, but also to be sort of swept along by an engaging narrative is common to how people consume all sorts of information, not just journalism, I think some of the same principles really should apply across the board, which is being fair and honest to the data at hand, really should be a principle followed by everyone, I understand that corporate communication cannot always be in the same business as journalism. So perhaps one part or you know, some aspect of the data is being communicated. But then being fair to that data and not sort of, you know, twisting and manipulating it to the point that it's almost sort of

unrecognizable, from where it was, is a principle that I think everyone should follow. Meanwhile, I think journalism stands to learn from the, you know, tactics of persuasive storytelling that that are followed by communication professionals, I don't think that journalists who believe that, you know, the information and the data is paramount, and sort of dumping it on readers and viewers to figure it out as they want needs, that their job is done. I don't think that's true at all. And I think people who complain about short attention spans about people not being interested in information and only wanting entertainment, it's really a failure of communication, rather than have the information or have the viewer or reader themselves. I think the question needs to be turned back on us to ask us, Why are we doing a poor job of communication, communicating this vital information or data that's making it uninteresting for younger people who are turning off and looking at something else? So I think there are lessons for both sides to take from each other, towards building more compelling data driven narratives.

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Radha

14:00

You know, interpretation of data, in some sense, right, in terms of what part of the data does one communicate and how, so a lot of times, you know, having data is one thing, and how do I interpret or what part of the data I share is another thing altogether, right? And that's how also sometimes polarized narrative gets created. So from a brand perspective? How can one, you know, remain true to the data and its interpretation.

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Rukmani

14:41

That so one of the things that I have been thinking about a lot is the notion of, of independence, neutrality, objectivity, fairness, and where I've really sort of settled my thinking on is that an expectation of Beyond neutrality from a communicator is a sort of fool's pursuit. And perhaps what would be much more useful would be to think about notions of fairness. So just as a journalist is unlikely to be a sort of robotically neutral person, because she has human and inbuilt biases and views of our own, similarly expecting sort of complete neutrality from a brand that is in the business of trying to promote itself is I think, a police pursuit. So I think expecting, you know, pure objectivity from a brand trying to communicate its identity, its position is not really, you know, what we should necessarily be pushing for. But what we should be pushing for is integrity and fairness in the communication of that data. So, not obfuscating, not outright lying with data and not cherry picking should be sort of important tenets of communication. And if there is, you know, if the brand is having to, so thinly slice and dice and sort of play around with narratives to communicate one part of the data that makes it good, then it really, I believe, should take a long, hard look and consider whether the brand first needs to take some internal lessons from that data, and then think about what they need to be communicating. And more and more, I think this sort of behaviour is going to get called out, you know, people are going to see through this very sort of spinning of time, tiny bits of positive information in an otherwise large sea of sort of negative information. Two pitches are very one sided view. So across the board, all of us communicating information, including those who communicate information for brands, I think should, you know, function on the basis of integrity and fairness. And perhaps this should be communicated right through the organization. So that a sort of junior copywriter or a junior researcher does not feel that her job there is to sort of, you know, excavate all the data to find one positive thing to say about the brand. If that notion of any principle of fairness is communicated throughout the organization, then I'm sure that it felt all the way through and I'm sure that will make the communication more credible, and make the brand more authentic.

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Radha

17:21

Thanks a lot and I really appreciate you talking to us on this platform.

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Rukmani

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Thanks so much for having me. Thank you.