

# **An insider's Take on How PR-Media Partnership Must Evolve in the Age of Hyper-speed Communication, Fragmented Attention, and Diminishing Trust**

**By Sunanda Mehta, Resident Editor, Indian Express**

## **Descriptor:**

In the keynote address at the recently held PRCAI Dialogues in Pune, the Indian Express resident editor, Sunanda Mehta, reflects on the evolving dance between journalism and Public Relations, from days of typewriters to AI, from building trust to responsiveness, from press release to reputation custodians. A must-read for storytellers of every stripe.

At the PRCAI Dialogues in Pune, the keynote speaker didn't mince words, or beat around the bush. Sunanda Mehta, Resident Editor at The Indian Express, walked in with the sharp clarity of someone who has clearly seen the arc of Indian media bend from typewritten scripts to algorithm-led timelines. "I was invited to talk about the change because there was no one else as old as me," she quipped, as the audience laughed, but were immediately drawn in to what she would speak next.

What followed wasn't just a keynote. It was a conversation between generations. Between journalists and Public Relations (PR) professionals. Between those who report and those who represent.

"I do belong to the typewriter era," she reminded the room. "We used white ink to delete mistakes, not the delete button to reclaim white space. When in a crisis, we turned to God, not Google, or called out to our **Aais**, not the AI." And yet, she noted, while communication tools have undergone a digital revolution, "the symbiotic relationship between the press and the PR industry has not transformed as dramatically."

That relationship, she argued, is still built on the same foundations: mutual dependence, professional friction, and occasional tension. Journalists rely on Public Relations professionals for access and insight. PR pros need journalists to carry stories beyond the press release. "My job is to tell stories that matter, cut through the noise, and keep the public informed," she said. "Your job equally is to communicate, be storytellers, and the architects of public perception."

And so began her five-part address- an insider's take on how this partnership must evolve in the age of hyper-speed communication, fragmented attention, and diminishing trust.

## **Trust and Transparency**

“Trust begins with transparency,” she said. Citing a 2024 Indian Media Research Council survey that found 62% of Indians express declining confidence in mainstream media, Mehta called it a wake-up call for both professions. The solution, she offered, isn’t a new spin to narratives but honesty.

She shared several examples - one of them being, a story from Rajasthan, where a PR team invited journalists to witness a digital literacy program for rural women – the depth of real story was discovered by being on the site. Instead of jargon-laden PDFs, the media was shown real people, real numbers. “50,000 women trained, 200 villages reached” and the human impact behind the press release. “That’s good PR,” she said. “It’s authentic, it’s human, and it respects the journalist’s need to verify and tell a compelling story.”

In moments of crisis: “a product recall, a data breach, a viral video of a CEO showing badly,” she urged PR teams to face the storm, not ghost it. “Hiding the truth is like trying to hide a monsoon downpour with a paper umbrella. It doesn’t work. Everyone ends up soaked.”

### **Emotion and Regionalism**

The next lens was regionality and emotion. “India is a tapestry of cultures, languages, and aspirations,” she said. “Authenticity is your currency; spend it wisely.”

From purpose-driven campaigns to hyperlocal storytelling, she reminded PR professionals that the best stories speak beyond boardrooms. “Ask: does this story speak to the farmer in Punjab, the techie in Bengaluru, or the student in Pune?”

She recalled a telecom ad showing a grandfather video-calling his granddaughter to hear her sing. “It wasn’t just about selling data plans. It was about family, connection, and the joy of technology bridging distances.” The takeaway was simple: good stories don’t need to be sold; they just need to be told.

Her thoughts on hyperlocal media were incisive: “A dead horse in my backyard affects me more than a flood in China.” Regional newspapers, she said, succeed by staying rooted, delivering news that is local, relatable, and trustworthy. Many have embraced digital platforms without losing their ground game. “Adaptability doesn’t mean abandonment.”

### **Adaptability and Agility**

And then came the reality check.

“Digital platforms now account for 55% of news consumption in India,” she noted. “The 24/7 news cycle demands agility from both of us.”

Shrinking newsrooms, rising content quotas, and the rise of social platforms have made journalism; and PR a more pressured space. “It’s become imperative to secure coverage without missing the critical window of relevance,” she said, recalling days when journalists would fight over the evening’s stack of press releases from the Patrakar Bhavan. Now they get delivered in individual inboxes.

Today, she said, both sides must master new tools: AI sentiment analysis, multimedia storytelling, hyperlocal targeting, without losing sight of principles. “Let’s embrace collaboration over competition,” she said.

## **Research and Relevance**

What she said next was almost a newsroom masterclass.

Tailor your pitch. Read the publication. Know your audience. And above all, respect the reporter. “A press release about your client’s CEO’s new yacht isn’t news. It’s a midlife crisis with a PR budget.” But if that same company is creating jobs in a small town? “That’s something we can work with.”

She warned against the thesaurus-wielding PR pitch. “I once received an email that began, ‘Esteemed purveyor of journalistic excellence...’ I still don’t know what they were selling, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t humility.”

Instead: “200 words. No attachments. A good quote. A photo. A real number. That’s enough.” Simplicity, she reminded everyone, is still the most underrated PR tool.

## **Responsiveness and Readiness**

And finally, availability. In critical moments, she said, too many Public Relations reps disappear. “It’s amazing how often we are ghosted by PRs when it’s critical.” She cited two cases: an educational institute and a hospital where silence eroded credibility. “If a PR professionals cannot give us confirmation in critical times - we lose trust.”

The fix? Simple. “Quick turnaround with queries goes a long way.”

## **From Press Releases to Reputation Custodians**

Her conclusion was generous, but also clear-eyed. “Whatever a cynical journalist like me may say, clearly you all are doing something very right.” She acknowledged the industry’s growth trajectory - ₹2,500 crore in 2023, projected to touch ₹4,570 crore by 2030; and despite these impressive numbers what appealed to her more was the shift in role. “You are now the custodians of reputation.” Public Relations, she noted, isn’t just about promotion anymore. It’s about trust, crisis management, and shaping how companies respond to the world.

In a parting thought, she offered what might just be the guiding mantra for everyone in the room: “Our greatest asset is not reach, but relevance and credibility. Let’s commit to telling stories as they are, bring truth to the fore, and communicate with a credibility that is beyond doubt.”

And as a final nudge, one that stayed long after the applause, she added, “Above all, let’s stay human, despite the digital, robotic world we work in. That’s the one thing analytics and machines cannot better us at. As yet.”