

Serious business

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From the start, Anuradha Vittachi was told that television had no business being serious. Only two ideas, maximum, were to be made to fit into a half-hour documentary; anything more taxed the brain. Only what was fanciful was truly welcome, such as fantasy food and fantasy shows about castaways; anything more taxed the emotion.

Over time, she began to see that viewers felt toward television the same way. They were not interested in TV news as a means of getting a fuller picture of the world, the better to engage it. TV news was simply a way of updating themselves with, in her words, "canapé-culture soundbites."

But having come from a family of journalists, she had fortunately other influences. And these influences happened to believe, she says, "that the *raison d'être* of journalism was not to indulge in escapism, nor to push a narrow view of reality to prop up state propaganda or private greed (Murdoch was the family bogeyman) but to help us understand as much of the Big Picture as possible?in order to make the world a fairer place."

So Anuradha became a documentary-maker, a journalist, and an author who liked to think serious things about the media. In fact, she has arrived at two proposals for a responsible media.

One, that media work out a "vertical communications flow between the ruled and the rulers." That is, that media take on the task of carrying the needs and questions of those below to those above and, conversely, of bringing news and analyses about those above to those below.

And two, that media work out a "horizontal, circular flow." That is, that media create a "citizens' space" for all those who want to move their truths around among curious others to test, refine, or simply share.

But already, she enthuses, the communication field has expanded exponentially. Most exciting for her are the public-service media systems which experiment with mixing email, radio, video, mobile telephony, Web and satellites as new information delivery platforms.

In fact, Anuradha pioneered the development of OneWorld.net. whose intent, she notes, is to guard the vision of a world "where resources are shared fairly and sustainably, where human rights are nurtured and protected, and where democratic governance structures enable people to shape their lives."

These expansions of territory?and influence?are particularly exciting for Anuradha for their possibilities. With new channels of communication not owned by "commercial gatekeepers" and out of reach of government censors, there is, she believes, real life now throbbing in media. And the best thing about it is no one is going to be around to tell her that these can't be in the business of being serious.