

PAID NEWS: A HURDLE IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Corruption in the mass media in India and elsewhere is as old as the media itself. If there is corruption in society, it would be unrealistic to expect the media to be free of corruption. India is the world's largest democracy. A vibrant and diverse mass media is an important pillar of democracy in the country.

Introduction

As rightly quoted by Abraham Lincoln, the democracy means rule of the people by the people and for the people. In the democratic setup it is the people who elect their candidate and that elected candidate joins the governing process on behalf of the people. It is therefore very important that the people should select the candidate with utmost care and caution, as their future will be in his or her hands for a considerable period (as we do not have till date any provision recalling a candidate).

Media plays a very important role in shaping the minds of the people. The media virtually controls the minds of the people. People tend to believe what the media says. It plays a vital role in forming the opinion of the people. Media can be the voice of the people. In *Nirbhaya* case, it was the strong protest of the media which forced the authorities to take strong action against the authorities who initially were reluctant to even file an FIR. Earlier in *Priyadarshini Matoo* case it was because of media's pressure the accused, who had been scot free in trial court was convicted. Media is therefore regarded as a powerful tool in democracy. It is also regarded as a watch dog of democracy. Even the great freedom fighters had realised and acknowledged the strength of media. Mr. Pandit Jawaharla Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India had said that "I would rather have a completely free press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed or regulated press."

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Since the power of media is immense, it has a crucial role to play in a democratic setup, especially in country like India. The media has to empower the citizens with unbiased information. It shall impartially bring out the merits and demerits of the government actions. The media shall fearlessly bring out corrupt practises, if any done by any of the candidates, so that people will not vote for him and the others will be deterred not to be involved in any of corrupt practises. It shall also organize debates on issues of public importance so that the people will be in a position understand different angles and of the problems.

It is now no secret that the journalism which was a noble profession at one time is now only limited to money making business. It is now giving more significance to TRPs and monetary benefits than serving the interest of the people. This policy of the media gives rise to evils like media trial, sensitization, paid news, etc.

Concept of Paid News

Paid news means publishing any favourable content to any one or publishing any content which will cause prejudice to someone, for the benefit of some other one, at the instance of the latter for exchange of money or other favours. Such publications are generally disguised as news but are not the news. The Press Council of India defines the concept of paid news as 'as any news or analysis appearing in print or electronic media for consideration in cash or kind'¹¹⁴. A paid is an advertisement which is disguised as news to make reader or viewer believes that it is a news when actually it is not.

The phenomenon of "paid news" has acquired serious dimensions. Today it goes beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media companies and has become pervasive, structured and highly organized. In the process, it is undermining democracy in India. This has anguished the leading sections of the society, including political leaders, thinkers, journalists and media owners. They all have expressed their unhappiness and concern about the pernicious influence of such malpractices¹¹⁵.

The phenomenon of "political paid news" became particularly noticeable during the 2009 general elections and thereafter

¹¹⁴ <http://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/?tag=press-council-of-india>.

¹¹⁵ <http://presscouncil.nic.in/oldwebsite/councilreport.pdf>.

during the elections to the assemblies of various states. The phenomenon acquired a new and even more destructive dimension by redefining political “news” or “reporting” on candidates standing for election – many such “news reports” would be published or broadcast perhaps only after financial transactions had taken place, almost always in a clandestine manner. It is widely believed that many media companies, irrespective of the volume of their businesses and their profitability, were “selling” news space after arriving at an “understanding” with politicians and representatives of corporate entities that were advertisers. Space in publications and airtime were occupied by advertisements that were disguised as “news”¹¹⁶.

The evil of paid news is rampant in India. In these elections only there was paid news. As much as 3100 notices were issued and 787 cases confirmed of paid news 43. Considering such high numbers, in order to analyze the problem and get the solution we shall first examine the concept of paid media, and the prejudice it causes to free media. Paid news is a Phenomenon where the media is engaged in publishing either favorable or unfavorable news, with an intention to favor a particular entity for payment. The press council defines paid news as any news or analysis appearing in print or electronic media for consideration in cash or kind ⁴². Paid news is always undermines the democratic spirits as it misleads the public and making them form an incorrect opinion. It also causes undue influence on voters, who are supposed to be the real rulers in any democratic country. It helps the candidate to spend extra on election campaign, as the amount paid to media to get a favorable coverage is not calculated in the election expenses made by that candidate, who pays media for a favorable coverage. News has to be neutral, unbiased and fair. News shall provide true and accurate report, while advertisement on other hand is not fair. It is made to promote a person or promote some article or someone. Advertising is a means of communication with the users of a product or service. Advertisements are messages paid for by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence people who receive them, as defined by the Advertising Association of the UK.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ <http://presscouncil.nic.in/oldwebsite/councilreport.pdf> para 3.

¹¹⁷ <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/advertising>.

Causes of Paid News

1. Lack of clear distinction between editorial section and management.

The primary cause for erosion of independence is journalism is contract system employment. Because of this the status of journalist was reduced to marketing agents. Actually the press council is in favour of a clear distinction between management and editorial staff.

2. Journalists and reporters are under paid.

The journalists and reporters are underpaid. Most of the media personnel gets a very less wages. Many journalists or reporters work on commissions or on contract basis¹¹⁸. They are mostly bringing advertise, and eventually working as market representatives rather than journalists standards.

3. Cross Media Holdings

There are no limitations on ownership of the media segments, which could give rise for monopolistic practices.

Proposal of Election Commission in Respect of Paid News

The Commission has proposed to the Ministry of Law & Justice, Govt. of India for the amendment in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to provide therein that publishing and abetting the publishing of 'Paid News' for furthering the prospect of election of any candidate or for prejudicially affecting the prospect of election of any candidate be made an electoral offence under chapter-III of Part-VII of Representation of the People Act, 1951 with punishment of a minimum of two years imprisonment. The issue is pending with the Govt. of India¹¹⁹.

Conclusion

Media acts as an interface between a citizen and the Government. Media is a very powerful tool, with the ability to make and break the opinion of common man for instance, if media tells the public that a particular picture is being demanded as one of the most wanted terrorists, people would

¹¹⁸ As per <http://164.10047.134/intranet/PAIDNEWS.pdf> around 80% of journalists are getting very less wages.

¹¹⁹ http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/ElectoralLaws/compendium/CompendiumonPaidNewsFeb%202014_21032014.pdf.

trust it blindly. It has the capacity to charge perceptions or evoke emotions. This is what it has gained faith of public.

The evils of paid news try to malign the image of media and also raise serious doubts over media freedom. One will not advocate free media, if it tries to cause hindrance in justice, and supports the person or party for some monetary or some other favours.

