

PAID NEWS SAGA- A STUMBLING BLOCK IN NATION BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Mass media is called upon to play agenda setting role, but this role itself has undergone a tremendous metamorphosis with the emergence of paid *news syndrome* in the country. Recently, some newspapers and media houses are passing off untruth information in the guise of real news items. The practice of paid news in India has been fuelling malpractices like advertorials, biased opinionated news, yellow journalism etc. Today, paid news phenomenon has gone beyond the individual journalist and has reached the organizational level of media establishments. Spreading its tentacles across all news media of communication, it has become pervasive and highly organized. It is not only undermining the fabric of democracy but also acting as a stumbling block in nation building. As fourth estate of the democracy, the press should have contributed a positive role. But, on the contrary, it is eroding the development of the society. This paper is a humble attempt to dissect the present trends of paid news saga that stands as a big obstacle in the role of nation building.

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Accepting payment to write a particular story and giving it the slant that the payment warranted is absolutely against the ethics of the profession—B.N. Rao(The Hindu).

INTRODUCTION

When Gutenberg started the journey of the ‘print word’, he had hardly imagined that as a media, the ‘print word’ could make the world dance to its tune. The fundamental objective of the profession of journalism has been to cater to the public and satisfy their crave for news, views, comments, analyses and other types of information in a fair, accurate, true, objective, balanced and comprehensive manner (Neelamalar, 2010; G. Anita, 2012). Currently newspapers and electronic media, especially 24 x7 television news channels in India have been practicing a ‘special genre of journalism’ wherein they are creating confusion in the minds of the audience to such an extent that, on certain occasions, news is presented in such a sensational manner that dressed up news passes off as real news (G. Anita, 2012). Keeping faith in what has been presented as a news package and believing in journalists has become a very coherent matter as well as somewhat risky business in the present world. The Indian press already known for its

obsession for political news, gossip and masala items and sensationalism to the over brim (Murthy,2000;Sainath,1996;Goswami,1994), is certainly going to rewrite the definition of news as something that has to be necessarily ‘political’. If it is not political news, it would not pass the media gatekeepers hierarchy. The practice of coverage of development news stories will be a thing of the past and paid news be the in thing. The spirit of Indian journalism, long known for its fairness and balance before the onset of the globalization, has suffered a dent due to this packaging. The troubles generated by ‘information saturation’ has been probably aptly summarized by T.S. Eliot when he states-

“Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Contrary to a declining trend being observed presently in the developed countries like USA and Europe, print media in India is witnessing an unprecedented boom in the present times. In the worlds’ fastest growing media market, registration of newspapers and magazines in India is on the rise, as reported by the Press Registrar of India’s latest annual report. Survey reports by INS, IRS, AC Nielsen, ORG-MARG, Gallup Pool Organization and other market survey organizations reveal that existing newspapers have been recording steady increase in readership and circulation figures. Not only with the traditional print sector, Indian entertainment and media sector is also having many fold rapid growth with majority of the consumer population being below the age of 35 with their pockets have increasing amount of disposable income, the average spend on media and entertainment is likely to grow up and up steadily (PricewaterhouseCooopers, 2009). The Indian media are no more the same thing as they used to be prior to 1990’s. It also boasts of a media industry, the products of which are the most widely watched Bollywood films in the world and sensational TV serials and reality shows(Charu Lata Singh,2012). Television in Indian now covers more than 600 million people, nearly half the population of the entire country and therefore world’s largest TV audiences are in India. As a business, cable and satellite TV rivals the print media in terms of reach and ad revenue pie which is why the centre of world cricket has shifted to India (T.N. Ninan, 2009). On the other hand, developments like increasing Foreign Direct Investments in entertainment sector, increased private participation, advances in technology, presence of foreign media companies are some of the favourable catalytic elements working in favour of the media boom in India (Charulata Singh, 2012). India is the fastest growing telecom market in the world (Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, 2001), where it has 140 million phones and four millions are being added every month. It also witnesses huge growth in social media among the youths and it is definitely hot right now. As of 2011, India is home to more than 83 million people having access to the internet. The total number of internet users in India is more than the population of countries like UK, France, and Switzerland (Charulata Singh, 2012). The chatter of the Indian blogosphere through social media networking platforms like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and *Orkut* , is growing vigorously with each passing day. For sure, the numbers are bound to rise manifold in the coming years with the increasing penetration of broadband Internet Service Providers and advent of 3G speeds. It is now indispensable part of everyday life of online

Indians who are always hungry for digital information. All this is a positive sign of democracy, of course the largest in the world of genuine multimedia.

PAID NEWS IS IN

The term ‘paid news’ is used to describe a practice wherein a newspaper, television channel or media house illicitly signs a deal with an individual, especially, a candidate in the electoral fray, assuring him a fixed quantum of coverage through a combination of advertisements and laudatory news items favouring him, and for an additional fee agrees to run a negative campaign against or completely black out his rival(Natarajan 2010; G Anita, 2012; Pitabas Pradhan, 2012). The entire exercise is done secretly, no disclosure is made before such news items is printed or broadcast. Often these reports are colourfully presented in such a manner that it creates an aura of being objective and fair and eventually they make the public believe such reports to be true.

The information hungry Indians are said to welcome any news. A record reveals that there are more than 70,000 registered newspapers and 450 plus television channels operating in India. But, a million dollar question remains and that is would it serve the purpose in the society .The journalism profession could not resist its temptation for power and pelf, make the public service principle undergo a metamorphosis to self-service. Not only are the individual journalists to be blamed for the malaise, even media houses and media conglomerates have been frequently indulging in malpractices for profit motive as we have seen in the case of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire imbroglio. Sporadic events of reporters and correspondents being offered cash and other incentives by political leaders in return for favorable reports were not new, but paid news at the institutional level is on the rise which is more alarming phenomenon of the recent past.

THE QUESTION OF LOSING CREDIBILITY

Although the Indian media scenario has witnessed dramatic changes, but to be honest, it is at the cost of traumatic experiences (Charulata Singh, 2012).The quantity has increased but quality has come down and the credibility of the news media is on the wane because of it getting infected with the virus of paid news syndrome(PNS). Edelman, an independent Public Relations firms in its 2010 Trust Barometer Survey conducted in 22 countries worldwide, including India, stated that the Indian media have been losing their credibility and trust among the people. In another survey conducted by the Reader’s Digest known as Trust Survey in March 2010, journalists were ranked 30th out of 40 professionals listed and were placed next only to barbers and bus drivers((Lakshmi L. Lund and PE Thomas, 2012).

Thus what has been emerging on the surface is the tip of a discouraging practice of “dressing up of news” by some journalists and media houses in exchange of huge amount of cash and kind for their financial gains. Such dishonest practices being followed in the mass media in India in the recent times, the levels of trust is bound to drop further, which would be harmful in building

a vibrant democracy in the country. Indeed, this is an astonishingly unhealthy practice in the largest democracy of the globe, where fake information, speculative journalism, sensationalism, manipulated news, invasion of privacy, and trail by media are sometimes making rounds. Examples are not very far to be found, when a chief ministerial candidate made advantageous use of the print media during the 2009 elections in Maharashtra. Media reports reveal that innumerable complimentary news reports and feature articles on candidates on the fray have appeared in the last Maharashtra and Haryana in return for a fixed payment (Pitabas Pradhan, 2012; Lakshmi L. Lund and P.E. Thomas, 2012). As per reports the size of paid news market in Andhra Pradesh in 2009 elections was over 1000 Crore rupees, while in Maharashtra it was several thousand Crore (Pitabas Pradhan, 2012). Such research data speaks of the volumes of the practice becoming rampant in Indian election scenario (Sainath, 2010). The Press Council of India (PCI) and the Election Commission of India (ECI) is of the view that paid news is rampant in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana. It is comparatively less prevalent in the states that went to polls in 2011 like Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, and Pondicherry (Lakshmi L. Lund and P.E. Thomas, 2012). Despite having a code of conduct for the journalist to adhere to, the discouraging trend of paid news or exaggeration in news presentation has percolated deep in the Indian mediascape. The 2009 Maharashtra elections has been an eye opener of the phenomenon. The Election Commission of India and the Press Council of India has been made aware of the malpractices. But years have passed since then with little concrete steps taken to bring down the instances of paid news in the Indian newspapers.

MASS MEDIA IN NATION BUILDING

Mass media is an agenda setter in the society and it helps us direct our course of action and shape public opinion and perceptions. But, what if, a false, fabricated news item is presented to the public. It becomes worst when some critical information is designed or redesigned with a vested interest to mould the targeted audience resulting in a serious setback for democracy. It is a threat to the nation and the masses when false news or information becomes an instrument for politicians, bureaucrats and other relevant parties to gain mileage. The so-called pillars of democracy including the press must create a congenial atmosphere to maintain faith in the system by the public as well as keep watch on the elements that may ruin the system as a whole. Unfortunately, the paid news with a trivial slant have made a big entry in the world of media in the recent past making the system volatile for the guards of the society at present.

In such a situation, it can be said that the three pillars of democracy i.e. Judiciary, Executive and Legislature have gradually lost its relevance in the present times. Except these three pillars of democracy there was a hope on the fourth estate of democracy which is why the press is commonly assigned a watch dog role for each and every aspect of society. Although India has successfully launched its moon mission, but India's burning issues are poverty, malnutrition, educational backwardness, illiteracy and gender disparity. Are the Indian mass media addressing these issues? On the contrary, by degrees, the credibility of the press is on the wane

because of it getting infected by the malaise of a sort of cancer called *paid news syndrome* (PNS). It is an irony that Indian mass media is on its money making journey through paid news syndrome, shunning its cherished vision and mission role .

Media, which has a strong power to mould the opinion among masses, might be very dangerous for the society, if it has intention to do bad for others. We get various types of lucrative advertisement and advertorials in the media. Except these, the paid news is a kind of evil in the world of media and it can deceive the common people easily. It is very difficult to find out difference between the news and the paid news. Everything comes in the media are regarded as true and fair by the general people. The long time experience bound to compel people for keep faith on the media. Common people regarded media as one of the sacred and truth guide for them. But, the real story is something different .It is like a hill which is always viewed nice from long distance. Now, money becomes the only means which can buy the moral and whatever it wants. The free and open economy policy and capitalism make the world crazier for money, power and glamour. It creates some selfish person whose primary intention is to grab the power and anything which attract them. These people use media for their own selfish purposes. These cunning communities are paying money for making news for their benefits. Media gradually lost its dignity and got it involved in malpractice at a larger scale.

Some recent complaints lodged with the Press Council of India throws damning light on an industry that is meant to serve as a bulwark against corruption. The vernacular dailies in India are the biggest culprits in this case, but their national language counterparts, also do not escape criticism. The malpractice of paid news has become widespread and now cuts across newspapers and television channels. It is during elections; its worst form can be seen. Even newspapers have been accused of presenting a rate card to political candidates who wants to have a favourable coverage for themselves or critical coverage for their opponents.

A time was when Gandhiji looked upon journalism as a means to serve the people. His idea was that *‘The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy’*. The Second Press Commission too had echoed the same sentiment regarding the role of the press in a developing democracy like India which ought to be that of a constructive critic or constructive opposition. It went on further to say that the press should play a responsible role of ‘opposing official policy when it is a must, supporting when it can and at all times bringing instructive opinion to bear from different angles on all important issues so that the people may decide with full knowledge’.

PARADIGM SHIFT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE TO COMMERCIALIZATION

While inaugurating the Bombay station, Sir Ibrahim Rahimatoola, the chairman of the Indian Broadcasting Company, on July 23, 1923 expressed that the earnest desire of the company was to “work broadcasting in a spirit of public service”. In later years the business of communicating news and information shed its service motive as people who were willing to invest money for

quick transmission and reception of commercial information, entered and started running the media organization for profit maximization (Charu Lata Singh, 2012). For a brief period, news organizations had political leaders at the vanguard when India was struggling for independence. But with the attainment of independence, news business went back to the hands of businessman.

It was after the introduction of liberalization of the economy, India had been witnessing very degrading condition on social system since 1991 and there has been a complete paradigm shift. Eventually, all media of communication, entertainment channels, newspapers and magazines etc., saw that news and advertising could bring handsome profits to all channels. The anti-social activities i.e. e-fraud, malpractices like cyber-crimes, hacking , deceiving others, corruption and other bad things had been increasing day by day. New concepts like media convergence, emerging social networking platform like *Google Plus*, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Orkut*, *YouTube*, etc., makes the media more powerful than before but corporate houses, media conglomerates and big companies have become the owner of the media industry who hardly have any sense of journalistic mission. Glamour, power and money are the things which can be getting in the media business. While profit had been once in the service of news, news came to be profit at many news organizations, result-even news could be manipulated for profits and news ethics were sacrificed. So, news is one of the most profitable industries in the world. The business which is aimed only at profit motives is very dangerous for the society. Profit motive and deceiving people are the main principles of paid news and other current maladies of private treaties, disguising of pure ads as news. With cost of running media organizations getting dearer every day, media are run like any other business for profit (Charu Lata Singh, 2012). In the whole process, a paradigm shift is visible, the basic purpose of news media organizations to act as informer and educator of the people has been relegated to back seat, the envisioned motto of “spirit of public service” has been in the “spirit of profit maximization”.

Through the paid news, big companies try to grab the attention of government and common people for their benefits. One such case was witnessed when a private pharma company spread the message of danger and possibility of encephalitis through the media and was able to garner contract for supply of their manufactured medicines for government hospitals worth corers of rupees. But the truth is that only 5 people die on an average day due to encephalitis, but in contrast, 12,000 people die to diarrhea in a day in India. The big medicine companies are not only using advertising but also paid news space to reach out to people with fear appeal and maximize profit in the market. What peril comes to the society is not matter of concern for these community, and doctor pharma company nexus is a fact which is not unknown to the powers that be.

The paid news culture has been on the rise in India. Indeed, it is alarming news for the media industry of India. It has been spreading its tentacles slowly all over the country, with the regional vernacular press being the first to be infected. At present, paid news client are started by media organizations in different places of our nation. Transparency International reports states that big

cities in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar have seen surge of separate offices being opened for collection of paid news. These offices have such personnel as marketing executives who are keeping contract and liaison with political leaders, business men, and corporate organizations for paid news. Even the world's largest circulated and India's own *The Times of India* is said to be encouraging its correspondents by sharing 10% of ad revenue collected by them. They created different types of package for different prices. These media houses create mythical information for the society. This is a main obstacle for the development of the society. Media started the journey to deceive defenseless innocent masses by paid news, advertorial, advertisements and yellow journalism of highest order.

The naked picture revealed in the last Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha elections when some political leader's involved in malpractices for gaining of public support by paid news is none more an open sacred. The Chief Minister of Haryana, Bhupinder Singh Hooda openly expressed in après conference about his annoyance against a daily newspaper which was paid by someone from his opposition camp for writing against him and Hooda, in turn, acknowledged having paid a bigger sum to stop writing against him. Isn't it a case of dressing up news by the powerful politicians of our country to suit their selfish interests? The former Chief Minister of Maharashtra Ashok Chavan indirectly expressed that his party had spent 12,370 Crore for paid news. The most circulated daily newspaper, *The Hindu*, revealed that the Congress Party spends more for paid news than the Ashok's party in the Maharashtra's Assembly election. It is worth to be mentioned here that the political leaders had spent more than 400 Crores as paid news in the last elections.

The corrupt political leaders always push media persons to publish paid news. The media which involved paid news activity can earn huge amount of money and this attracted other media organization for involve in the process. Such an environment is enough to create competition for earn more money among media organizations. The editor and journalist bound to listen and obey the order of the owner of the media organization. So, they become only puppet to write and make news on the direction of the managing editor. In these days, the owner of the media organization starts marketing departments for collection of paid news. The district correspondents also assign to collect paid news.

In this era of free market and economic liberalization, media workers are not only assigned to make news but also they have to create a lobby with big Corporate Houses, political leaders, business personalities, ministers and high profile figures of the society. From small to big Corporate Houses, Business Companies have internal agreement for benefit of their companies. The media organization and big corporate houses are internally involved in forging a treaty of *unholy holy nexus* making for their benefits. SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) urged government of India to create law against such malpractices and demanded media organization to disclose the treaties with Business Organizations in front of the public.

The eminent journalist P. Sainath, who had been at the vanguard of a crusade against paid news from the very beginning time, had invited Election Commission and Press Council of India to take action against such involvement of political parties in anti social activities. Thinking about the pathetic condition on the society, The Press Council of India had constructed a sub Committee for investigate the matter on the month of July 2010. The members of the committee were UGC member Paranjay Guha Thakurta and veteran journalist Sreenivas Reddy. They had visited different places and collect information from media personalities, common people, intellectual people, media analysis specialists, political leader and social servant. The committee published 80 pages report where revealed about different politicians, business, corporate organizations involvement in the malpractice of paid news for their self purposes. But the report which was made on the investigation of the committee did not have support from the media organizations which led to failure of the report. Only 15 pages report was made out of it. The Press Council has not power to do anything against the malpractice of the media organizations. So, Press Council of India has failed to control such kind of evil practices of the media.

Today, it is frequently noticed that media houses generally run after the politicians and corporate houses only. The famous journalist P. Sainath wrote that less than half numbers of journalists are being assigned for reporting on the suicide of farmer on the remote area than cover a fashion show in Mumbai. The news on launch of a new car gets more importance than the bad transport system of the country. One study conducted by Centre for Media Studies(CMS) Delhi revealed that the news channels broadcast very less number of news on health, agriculture, environment and rural sector of the society but it broadcast lots on leisure things- page three masala stories. The Indian media is portraying an artificial picture of the society, it does not show the real picture of the society.

CONCLUSION

The hapless masses are affected very badly as a result of paid news. India, which had been praised for its high moral virtue, gradually lost its image due some antisocial activities. If this trend is going on then it is sure and certain that we will lost all whatever remains. The democracy, which is regarded as the best form of government for the any country stands as a big doubt for India. Now we get only malpractices every sector in the society. So, after the 65 years of independence, still India did not eradicate poverty and very poor performance of education and social development. But, unfortunately, media doesn't take the matter in its prime time but it is busy with cover the IPL news or focusing about political leaders fake promises or launches any product of a multinational company. Our children are born into homes in which dominant story tellers are not those who have something to tell but small group of global conglomerates that have something to sell (George Gerbner, 2002). Thus, media now speak mostly for the paid community. It is no matter for them whether it is based on fake or real fact. In this juncture, Paid news proves as a big challenge in the development story of India.

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A poster for a seminar titled "MEDIA GOVERNANCE & YOUTH". The text is in yellow and white on a dark, textured background. It is an ICSSR sponsored seminar organized by the University School of Mass Communication, GGSIP University, N. Delhi, on 21st & 22nd May 2013. It includes submission deadlines, registration fees, and contact emails.

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