

# Trend of “Paid News in Media”: A Danger to Healthy Democracy

Dr. Bharat Kumar

**Abstract:** *Today a number of people admit the fact that journalism, which was a mission before the Independence, has gradually turned to a tool for making money, expanding its marketing network more and more for profit. Entry of business tycoons in media and proliferation of many newspapers has led to a decline in professionalism and has diluted the quality of journalism, in general. This decline has come at both journalist and management level. According to the data released by the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), the total number of registered newspapers stood at 82,337 of which 4853 new newspapers were registered during year 2010-11. The largest number of newspapers and periodicals registered in any language is in Hindi with a figure of 32,793.*

**Keywords:** Paid, News, Media, Democracy

## 1. Introduction

In routine coverage, some journalists have been accepting money at their level but during the election, management directly takes amount as paid news, giving adequate and full page coverage. Media organizations of print and electronic are known as media houses and corporate houses. Media and entertainment has taken form of an industry. It has attracted rich to invest money in this sector for financial growth through advertisements and paid news. Centre and state governments and semi government organizations also promote profit making concept of media by giving them advertisements through the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP). We find most the pages of highly circulated and medium and local newspapers with adequate advertisements displayed.

But, the desire of more and more money by media industry, could not remain satisfied with the profit through advertisement so they have explored a new area of making money through the ‘Paid News’ during the election time in the name of giving definite election coverage.

The trend of paid news by the candidates, contesting parliamentary and assembly elections started from the year 2004 with NDA’s theme of “Shining India’. Candidates of other major parties with adequate election funds also used this practice on the offer of media houses.

The media houses gave short coverage or stopped the routine coverage of election campaign of candidates and their press conferences. It compelled the candidates to pay under hand money to the marketing department of media houses for their adequate media coverage to woo electorate. This trend reached its maximum during the Parliamentary election of year 2009 when Election Commission of India under Model Code of Conduct put some restrictions on paid news and directed the election observers to check the media coverage of candidates through Paid News. Independent candidates and economically weaker candidates in the fray had expressed their serious concern for not getting coverage due to financial crunch and their inability to pay for Paid News.

The Election Commission of India on report filed by election observers found hundreds of cases where stalwart

politicians paid newspapers and TV channels for getting favorable coverage.

The former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Ashok Chavan, whose use of funds for paid news was questioned by the Election Commission of India in year 2010. As per findings of the Commission, the complaint against Mr Chavan was that he arranged publication of news items, manipulating as advertisements, in newspapers praising him in the 2009 State Assembly election. Besides this, the expenses in his election expenditure accounts were not properly accounted for. He also pretended claiming that the newspapers on their own had published stories on him.

Another case of Narottam Mishra, a Cabinet Minister of Madhya Pradesh, who, according to the Election Commission of India, ‘failed to lodge accounts of his election expenses in the manner prescribed by law’ and was linked to 42 news items on him during the November 2008 State Assembly election. In October 2011, Umlesh Yadav became the first ever sitting Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) to be disqualified for not declaring the expenditure incurred on advertising during the election campaign. Yadav, a member of Rashtriya Parivartan Dal had been elected from Bisauli, Uttar Pradesh in 2007. She was banned on several grounds from contesting election for a period of three years by the Election Commission of India.

The Election Commission is reported to have identified more than 1,400 cases of paid news with in a recent 4-year period, during which assembly polls were held in 17 states of India. In a video Aam Admi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal was seen as playing the role of a part-time editor and advising journalist of Aaj Tak channel to play a number of times a part of interview.

## 2. Trend of “Paid News in Media”

An Election Commission panel had held four Lok Sabha election candidates in Maharashtra guilty of resorting to paid news. Complaint against Congress candidates- Union Minister fo State for Shipping and IT, Milind Deora (Mumbai South), Sanjay Nirupam (Mumbai North), Vishwajit Kandam (Pune) and BJP candidate from Pune Deepak Shirole were found.

However, Ashok Chavan of Maharashtra pretended that his coverage was done by media on their own. But, another politician of Karnataka state, the Minister of State for Human Resources and Development, D. Purandeswari, admitted publicly in a seminar in year 2010 that media gave her coverage of election campaigning when her friend paid money to the newspaper management. She said paid news has become a bane in the media world and the Election Commission should look in to the aspect of paid news. During parliamentary elections, 'Nobody wrote what I had contributed on where I was campaigning. During the entire 15 days campaigning, newspapers wrote about me only once that too after a friend agreed to whatever they (media houses) wanted', she lamented while inaugurating a seminar on, "Changing trends in news presentation in media' in Bangalore.

I am of the view that despite time to time allegation of yellow journalism and biased journalism, people have still trust on media coverage. And specially during the election period, media creates an atmosphere in favor of any political party or candidate by constant coverage through paid news as the candidate is very strong. It influences the mind of electorates to some extent. Due to this, the election campaigning of economically weaker but honest and committed candidates does not catch momento as they are not at all in the fray.

People on tickets of small and regional parties fear to contest the election due to the existing concept of paid news. They think their voice shall not reach the electorates through the newspaper and TV channels. Thus, it is dangerous for a healthy democracy in the country.

Media plays a significant role in a democracy not only because it voices concern of the people but also it reflects the true picture of the country's social, cultural, economic and political set up. It is therefore, considered as the fourth pillar of democracy which not only acts as a repository of public trust but also plays a significant role in influencing the human mind. The Committee, therefore, feel that it is of paramount importance that various news / informative programmes delivered by the media through various modes like newspaper, radio, television, internet, mobile phone etc. are factual, neutral, fair and objective. The Committee are, however, deeply concerned to note that certain sections of the media have started receiving monetary or other benefits for publishing or broadcasting in favour of individuals / organizations / corporate entities, what is commonly being referred to as 'Paid News' and it has spread at remarkable pace in some sections of the media. The phenomenon has the effect of unduly influencing the financial / stock / real estate market, health, industry and influencing public opinion in election process. The Committee find it disturbing that Paid News' is not limited to corruption of individual journalists instead has become complex and 'organized' involving multiple players like journalists, managers / owners of media companies, corporations, public relations firms / advertising agencies and some sections of the political class. Feeling extremely concerned over the way the media has become compromised and the urgency required to curb

the menace the Committee took up this subject for detailed examination.

During the course of examination of the subject the Committee came across startling revelations that 'Paid News' is not only an election time phenomenon but happens every day and is prolific as launching / marketing of products / organisations / individuals happens around the year and advertisement for these are disguised and presented as full pages of 'news' / 'advertorials'. Even though the Committee note that the entire gamut of organisations / authorities like the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Press Council of India, Election Commission of India, News Broadcasters Association, Editors Guild of India, Prasar Bharati as well as various eminent personalities have acknowledged the menace of 'Paid News' and have impressed upon the need to take remedial measures, yet, the Committee find it astonishing that a large section of media is completely silent on this malpractice. As detailed in succeeding paragraphs, the Government has not taken effective and conclusive action to deal with the menace.

According to PCI's sub-Committee Report (2010) on 'Paid News', though the phenomena of widespread practice of 'Paid News' has been verbally confirmed and vindicated by politicians and campaign managers of political parties, there is no recorded documentation that could finally establish that there has been an exchange of money between media houses / advertisement agents / journalists and politicians / political parties. The Committee also note that as per the existing mechanism, on receipt of a complaint of 'Paid News' it would be looked into by the respective agency i.e. PCI in respect of complaints relating to Print Media and inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) in respect of content on satellite TV channels. Considering the fact that there is no straight jacket methodology for establishing this malpractice, the Committee urge the Ministry to brainstorm on this issue and put forward innovative solutions to consider and establish 'circumstantial evidence' in proving the menace. The Committee also desire the Ministry to consider the suggestion that there should be a team of experts specifically for analyzing the coverage pattern and if any unusualness is noticed in the coverage pattern, the concerned regulatory body should immediately swing into action. On the issue of retrieving the data / programme in electronic media for proving the case, the Committee recommend that the Ministry, in coordination with Prasar Bharati and other experts in the field, should evolve a mechanism for taking appropriate action on the available circumstantial evidence to establish the act of 'Paid News' in electronic media.

Taking a holistic view of the scenario, the Committee feel perturbed at the pathetic working conditions of the significant part of the media personnel while strongly disapproving the tendency of the media houses to hire and fire. The Committee strongly feel that contract employment should not be used as a tool for attraction / allurements. Sharing the concerns about the mounting pressure on the Editorial / Journalists / Reporters compelling them to indulge in 'Paid News' phenomenon,

the Committee are inclined to conclude that in spite of having several guidelines for segregating Editor and Management / Owners, the same are not being enforced efficiently.

### 3. Discussion

The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Government / concerned regulatory bodies should take all necessary steps for improving the working conditions of the journalists / media personnel and also ensure that the autonomy of the editorial staff is upheld forth with. More importantly, the media houses will have to rise to the occasion and act. The Committee desire that all the employees of media houses should be covered under the Working Journalists Act and be given the protection under the various provisions of the Act. The Committee also feels that there is a need for constitution of Media Commission to review the working conditions for media personnel i.e. covering print and electronic media. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Ministry while taking into consideration all these factors should formulate the regulatory mechanism and make provisions for periodic review of the working scenario / wage conditions of media personnel. The Committee would like the Government to apprise them about the specific action taken in the matter.

The Committee note that the increasing trend of presenting paid content as news / editorial / talk show / review is not only a serious fraud on the innocent audiences / readers / viewers / public but is also a threat to the democratic process. The Committee find it very disturbing that the malpractice of 'Paid News', which surfaced prominently during 2009 General Elections, is on the rise and has affected the entire country. The PCI's Sub-Committee Report on 2009 General Elections contains some shocking revelations indicating that media, which is considered as the fourth pillar of democracy, has its nose dipped in various clandestine operations including 'Paid News'. The Committee are startled with the revelation of PCI's fact finding team on Gujarat Election (2012) wherein they have cited 126 confirmed cases of Paid News with 61 candidates in the poll fray admitting to have paid for such news. The situation becomes more alarming in light of the District Level Media Certification and Monitoring Committee's observation that during Gujarat election 414 cases of paid news were confirmed. The Committee are alarmed to note that sections of media are deeply involved in the business of 'Paid News' and have started distributing rate cards / packages for not merely praising a particular candidate but also for criticizing their political opponents. Worse is the situation that if the candidates do not go along with such blackmailing / extortionist practice of the media they are denied coverage. The Committee note that there could be cases where there is no payment as such but still it may lead to negative / vindictive action for non-payment. The Committee, therefore, feel that this phenomenon has not only threatened our democratic set up but also added to the money power in politics in the Country. As regards the remedial measures to curb the menace, the Committee note that there has been suggestions from various quarters to amend the

Representation of the People Act, 1951 so as to make 'Paid News' a cognizable, punishable and electoral offence. The Committee find that the Election Commission of India has also favored necessary changes in the law for strict prevention of this malpractice and has made reference to the Law Ministry in the year 2011 to include 'Paid News' in the category of corrupt practices under the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

The Commission has also recommended to include publishing and abetting of publishing of 'Paid News' for furthering the prospects of election of any candidate as an electoral offence under Chapter III of Part VII of the 1951 Act, with exemplary punishment of a minimum of two years imprisonment. The Committee are, however, concerned to note that the proposal is still pending with the Ministry of Law and Justice.

The Committee also note that PCI in its Sub- Committee Report on 2009 General Elections had suggested for a mandatory disclosure, by all candidates / political parties, of equity stakes and / or financial interests in newspapers / television channels on which news about their candidates / parties as well as interviews with candidates and / or representatives of the political parties are published or broadcasted. Taking holistic view of the entire scenario the Committee note that the proposal made by the Election Commission is good one and merit urgent consideration of the Government for bringing appropriate amendment in the Representation of the People Act, 1951. The Committee are of the firm view that there is an urgent need to review the election code of conduct and the Representation of the People Act, 1951 as well as guidelines / rules framed there under so as to give more power to Election Commission to firmly deal with this menace. While considering the serious damage of 'Paid News' on electoral / democratic process, the Committee impress upon the Government to consider all their recommendations so as to put in place a comprehensive mechanism to tackle the menace of 'Paid News' by making necessary provisions in the set Rules / Guidelines framed there under and making necessary changes in model Code of Conduct for elections.

The Committee also urges the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to coordinate with the Ministry of Law and Justice for taking an early action on the proposals made by the Election Commission of India.

### 4. Conclusion

Media plays a significant role in a democracy not only because it voices concern of the people but also it reflects the true picture of the country's social, cultural, economic and political set up. It is therefore, considered as the fourth pillar of democracy which not only acts as a repository of public trust but also plays a significant role in influencing the human mind. The Committee, therefore, feel that it is of paramount importance that various news / informative programmes delivered by the media through various modes like newspaper, radio, television, internet, mobile phone etc. are factual, neutral, fair and objective. The Committee are, however, deeply concerned to note that

certain sections of the media have started receiving monetary or other benefits for publishing or broadcasting in favour of individuals / organizations / corporate entities, what is commonly being referred to as 'Paid News' and it has spread at remarkable pace in some sections of the media.

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Even though the Committee note that the entire gamut of organisations / authorities like the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Press Council of India, Election Commission of India, News Broadcasters Association, Editors Guild of India, Prasar Bharati as well as various eminent personalities have acknowledged the menace of 'Paid News' and have impressed upon the need to take remedial measures, yet, the Committee find it astonishing that a large section of media is completely silent on this malpractice. As detailed in succeeding paragraphs, the Government has not taken effective and conclusive action to deal with the menace.

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