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PAID NEWS: A CURSE ON NEWS JOURNALISM

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"Because today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups... So I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms."

Philip K. Dick

The concept of "paid news" is not new to the media or society. The ailment has been quite long-standing, complicated and deep-seated in the prevailing structure. However, in the recent times 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.ⁱ

Press Commission of India (PCI) defines paid news as, "Any news or analysis appearing in any media (Print & Electronic) for a price in cash or kind as consideration." As per the guidelines of the PCI on the paid news, it clearly states that, "news should be clearly demarcated from advertisements by printing disclaimers, should be strictly enforced by all publications. As far as news is concerned, it must always carry a credit line and should be set in a typeface that would distinguish it from advertisements."

In 2003, the Times of India initiated its 'Next Big Thing- Medianet' when Bennett, Coleman Company Limited (BCCL) redefined the 'definition of information' and initiated 'paid content



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service' or 'advertorials about products or services'. Medianet, has been blamed for the opening of the Pandora box of paid news epidemic. Subsequently in 2004, the Election Commissioner detected the menace of paid news during parliamentary elections. Later in 2009 the presence of paid news were strongly felt during the general elections. In 2014, EC confirmed approximately 787 cases of paid news and around 3,100 notices were issued to the violators, including former chief ministers , Madhu Koda and Ashok Chavan. Lately, during the Delhi Legislative Assembly Election-2015, around twenty cases of paid news were confirmed.

The key reasons identified behind paid news are: corporatisation of media, desegregation of ownership and editorial roles, decline in autonomy of editors/journalists due to emergence of contract system and poor wage levels of journalists, lack of political will to end this menace. In addition to this, there is media politics nexus. The press council acknowledged that a section of Indian media had 'indulged in monetary deals with some politicians and candidates by publishing their views as news items and bringing out negative news items against rival candidates' during the last elections.' Another reason is that the exiting regulatory bodies like News Broadcasting Standards Authority, Broadcasting Content Complaints Council, Press Council of India (PCI) and Electronic Media Monitoring Centre (EMMC), are not well organised and lack powers to deal with the paid news. Also there are blurred jurisdiction boundaries within these multiple organisations like ECI, PCI, MoIB etc. Thus creating ambiguity in terms of jurisdictions. Furthermore, the prevailing penal provisions to penalise lawbreakers are also ineffective.

But what makes paid news a problem is, firstly that it, paid news hoodwinks the public and obstructs their capability to form correct judgments and accurate opinions. As the content of paid news is designed to achieve certain effect or result by the parties who have invested their money in the development of content. Therefore the content, be it news, opinion, feature, served to the readers, audience or leaders misleads the public. Secondly, continuous flow of paid news influences the voters' behaviors, thus damaging the electoral process. Thirdly, it masquerades advertisements as news, as there is a deliberate attempt by the publisher to pass of an



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advertisement as news, thus again misleading the people. Fourthly, it violates the election laws and spending norms. Fifthly, it destroys the very soul of news journalism, which exists on the elements of truth, fairness, objectivity, accuracy, responsibility, impartiality, and fair play and exploits the freedom of the press.

The remedy for the paid news is responsibility for all sections of media and society, as it is threat to any democratic process. Firstly, there is a need to frame an all-inclusive legal definition of 'paid news' in order to avoid prevailing ambiguity in this regard. Secondly, a mechanism needs to be built to identify the paid news. Thirdly, in order to maintain the autonomy of editors/journalists, an established organisation like MoIB needs to continuously or periodically check the prevailing status of editors/ journalist. Fourthly, the financial stakes of the media houses, including editors and news producers need to be scrutinised. Fifthly, the media houses need to disclose the 'private treaties' undertaken by them with other organisations that are source of advertising revenue generation for the media house. Sixth, increasing the power of PCI and on similar lines establishing a body for electronic media, which can take strong action against the offenders, is need of the hour. Lastly, at the grass root level, the emphasis should me more on ethical and objective reporting rather than the TRPs and this is a collective endeavor where audience shun the unethical reporting and media houses stop serving the audience irresponsible, unethical paid news.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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ⁱ "Press Council of India Report on Paid News." Press Council of India (PCI). July 30, 2010. Accessed January 14, 2015. <http://presscouncil.nic.in/OldWebsite/CouncilReport.pdf>. The author has referred to this report while writing this article.