MEDIA AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY-PAID NEWS SYNDROME

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Abstract - Television out of all other Medias is the persuasive element of contemporary reflecting public opinion, respond to their concerns, create an awareness of state and finally control policies. Nowadays media are owned by big businesses, corporate houses, and politician but expected to adhere to the ideals of a neutral, fair and unbiased view on issues important for society and country. There is an evil nexus between the media and the wrong doers which has resulted in a concept called Paid News Syndrome. The news is much like an advertisement but without the tag. This paper tries to find out the issues of Paid News scenario in India with empirical evidences.

INTRODUCTION

Present day modern society life is to search ways to deal with changes-be at home, work or play. Research shows that we spend more time in media ways, though enough care should be taken so that media is not considered as a type of technology or a chunk of content that we could pick or choose from the world around us-this of course is in consideration that media's around us are external agents affecting us in innumerous ways. Roger Silverstone(2007) in his book" Media and Morality: On the rise of Mediapolis", famous journalist Ales de Jong and Mark Schuilenberg(2006) in his book "Mediapolis-Popular Culture and the City" have all described the world as a 'Mediapolis'. To them it is comprehensively mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of daily life.

Television out of all other Medias is the persuasive element of contemporary life and is expected to reflect public opinion, respond to their concerns, create an awareness of state and finally control policies. It is also expected to play a role in reporting wrong doings, follow ups as and when required, public opinion mobilization, bring about social changes and highlight positive developments. Unfortunately, everything goes hay ware here, as biasness creeps into the system. Media considered the fourth pillar of democracy after executive, legislature and judiciary is expected to play a constructive role like the other pillars in strengthening democratic values. History reveals that lot of Indian publications played a big and mature role in upliftment of the society and freedom struggle. But gone are those days when media (mainly print) was considered to be a reformer, thinker, and idealists heading publications with awareness and social welfare only on their mind. Present day media are owned by big businesses, corporate houses, politicians and shady characters and are the only pillar of democracy that is mostly run by private ventures but paradoxically expected to adhere to the ideals of a neutral, fair and unbiased view on issues important for society and country. Profits have taken priority over ideals and overall betterment of the society. Another unique thing which needs to be highlighted is that unlike other businesses where competition leads to better products for consumers, extreme competition in the media sector has resulted in lowering of standards. In a race for more viewership or TRP's, what the consumers get are sensationalism and twisted manufactured news. Print media has specific editorial lines ensuring a particular a particular issue to be covered vividly or suppressed.

Media in the present day scenario has become glamorized resulting in news anchors becoming more important than the news itself. Instead of news, views are presented. News debates have turned into high decibel affair resulting news getting negative as it generates more TRP's. Random individuals are presented as subject matter experts in their so called '10 minutes of fame'. Managing editors/ Executive editors of news channels becomes presenters as this gives a chance of being famous and their views are nothing but neutral(Pranjoy Joshi, Sushant Mehta, Manaranjan Bharati, Kamal Khan to name a few). Also, lack of law governing reporting enables factually incorrect and irresponsible reporting to sustain. It is also easy to get away by flashing a 10 second correction or middle page errata in incorrect reporting.

A classic example of irresponsible reporting by a journalist icon, Barkha Dutt came into the foray in the Kargil War (July, 1999). The Indian government allowed reporters to embed with army only to present India's views and let the country know how its brave soldiers are fighting in the war. But it was not the soldiers, but Barkha Dutt who was glorified more and furthermore endangered the lives of many of Ghatak Platoon of 18 Grenediers. Due to irresponsible reporting three soldiers lost their lives as Pakistan army knew about the planned Indian assault beforehand. Incidentally, this is in stark contrast to reporting by her mother Prabha Dutt who reported from Punjab in the war against Pakistan in 1965. A new concept of news writing is emerging across the

globe. There is an evil nexus between the media and the wrong doers which has resulted in a concept called Paid News Syndrome. Actually these are articles in newspapers, magazines and the electronic media, which indicate favorable conditions for the institution that has paid for it. The news is much like an advertisement but without the tag. This kind of news has been considered a serious malpractice since it deceives the citizens, not letting them know that the news is, in fact, an advertisement. Secondly, the payment modes usually violate tax laws and election spending laws. More seriously, it has raised electoral concerns because the media has a direct influence on voters. Paid news is a complex issue. Large sections of the corporate media have created a structural imperative towards such corrupt practices -- such practices entail negligible costs but promise potential and actual monetary gains that are substantial. Universally, rent-seeking, profit-maximizing entities will, as a general and even intuitive rule, act to increase returns rather than look at social externalities. But when the mass media adopts such corporate norms, in India and elsewhere, it sends a signal that it is willing to diminish or even abrogate its role as a protector of public interest and enforcer of accountability. It is no surprise, then, that the paid news problem as an organized phenomenon appears rather intractable, involving as it does, lawmakers and politicians cutting across party lines and representatives of sections of the corporate media who coexist symbiotically. This nexus cannot be weakened easily. At the same time, in India, a more alert citizenry (including readers of newspapers and viewers of television channels) can and has made a difference in bringing the problem of paid news to the public domain. In addition, sections of the country's mass media (some of which are on the fringes of the so-called "mainstream") have highlighted -- and will hopefully continue to highlight -- this corrupt phenomenon. Still, not all those named have been shamed. However, there is currently greater awareness of real and present dangers that paid news poses to Indian democracy.

There is a report titled “Paid News: How corruption in the Indian media undermines Indian democracy” by the Press Council of India It marshals a vast amount of material on the issue and is a compendium of media malpractice. It explicitly names newspapers and channels — including some of the biggest groups in the country — seen as having indulged in the “paid news” practice. The report speaks of the “deception or fraud” that paid news entails as having three levels. First: “the reader of the publication or the viewer of the television programme is deceived into believing that what is essentially an advertisement is in fact, independently produced news content.” Second: “By not officially declaring the expenditure incurred on planting “paid news” items, the candidate standing for election violates the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, which are meant to be enforced by the Election Commission of India under the Representation of the People Act, 1951.” And third: “by not accounting for the money received from candidates, the concerned media company or its representatives are violating the provisions of the Companies Act, 1956 as well as the Income Tax Act, 1961, among other laws.”

The report notes the “huge amount of circumstantial evidence that has been painstakingly gathered by a few well-meaning journalists, unions of journalists, other individuals and organisations together with the testimonies of the politicians and journalists who have deposed before the Press Council of India.” And says this “goes a very long way in establishing the fact that the pernicious practice of paid news has become widespread across media (print and electronic, English and non-English languages) in different parts of the country. Interestingly, this phenomenon appears to be less pervasive in states (such as Kerala or Tamil Nadu) where the media is clearly divided along political lines.”Here quoting Carl Bernstein would be relevant where he says, “The lowest form of popular culture-lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and contempt for the truth or the reality of most people’s lives-has overrun real journalism”.

It seems the Election Commission of India is the only body in the country that is seriously trying to combat the pernicious practice of "paid news". If other organizations, including organizations that claim to represent the interests of journalists and other media professionals, played a more proactive role in curbing this corrupt practice, the phenomenon of masquerading advertisements as news could be curtailed to some extent. This is unfortunately not happening at a significant pace. On 3 December, Vijay Dev, the Chief Electoral Officer of the country's capital said the Election Commission would be recommending action against at least six candidates, including the outgoing Revenue Minister in the Delhi government Arvinder Singh, for not disclosing the amounts they paid for planting "news" reports in publications in the run-up to the elections in their expenditure statements. The Commission had calculated the amounts spent by these candidates on "paid news" and if their total expenditure on campaigning was found to be exceeding the statutory ceiling of Rs 14 lakh per candidate, they could be disqualified even if they are elected as members of the legislative assembly. Whereas the six candidates were named -- besides Arvinder Singh, the others were Sushil Gupta (Congress), Neel Daman Khatri, Jai Prakash (Bharatiya Janata Party), Mohammad Saleem Saify and Dheeraj Kumar Tokas (Bahujan Samaj Party) -- Dev chose not to disclose the names of the publications that had allegedly received funds for publication of so-called paid news. The Commission had reportedly received 60 complaints

of paid news from its media certification and monitoring committee and served show-cause notices on 28 candidates; including the six named whose replies were apparently not found sufficiently convincing by the Commission's officials. All six reportedly denied having paid money for publication of favourable news items. The amounts ranged between Rs 4,893 (Jai Prakash, Sadar Bazar) to Rs 18,019 (Dheeraj Kumar Tokas, R. K. Puram).Dev said 24 more notices are expected to be issued. He added that the Election Commission would be interacting with the Press Council of India in the cases relating to the print medium and the "appropriate" body for complaints against television channels, presumably meaning the News Broadcasting Standards Authority, the ethics panel of the self-regulatory body of certain leading television news channels, the News Broadcasters' Association.

In 11 March 2013 story published in "Gujarat Samachar" largest circulated Gujarati daily, it was said that Gujarat BJP Lok Sabha MP of Vadodara Shri Balu Shukla while waiting for Leader of opposition in Lok Sabha smt Sushma Swaraj in her office accessed some files on her table and lifted three-four pages that were about correspondence between Swaraj and Gadkari.The news report further claimed that CCTV cameras inside Swaraj's office captured this act, and later Swaraj scold the MP. Swaraj also spoke with Narendra Modi about this and Modi too scoled the MP.

Gujarati daily's this story was later published in Rediff.Com in translated English version quoting Gujarat Samachar report, and Rediff Editor Sheela Bhatt tweeted: MP or spy? Shri Balu Shukla has in a letter asked Speaker Meira Kumar to hand over the matter regarding baseless news item published against him in Gujarat Samachar.Balu Shukla said to Meira Kumar that the news story has been published with motive to harm his image. This story has not only harmed his image but also an image of Leader of opposition Smt Sushma Swaraj, and BJP.

Balu Shukla in his letter said, the news item shows that I am a thief who stole papers from the office of leader of opposition. This remark clearly attacks my character. This news passes a message that leader of opposition's office is so lethargic that any MP can come there and without any problem he can steal letters from there. This news creates adverse image of leader of opposition's working style. The said news is baseless and it is proven by the fact that Leader of opposition's room has no CCTV camera!Balu Shukla in his letter further said that the news item involves his personal conduct inside the parliament campus and therefore this is an issue of breach of privilege against the Gujarati daily. Therefore this issue should be handed over to Lok Sabha's privilege committee. It should be mentioned that this news item was in discussion in political and media circles in Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad throughout Tuesday, but insiders were of clear opinion that this spicy story was a hit-job to tarnish the image of Balu Shukla in an attempt to stop him fighting next year's Lok Sabha election on BJP ticket. The insiders said that more hit-jobs like this will be seen in future in media and elsewhere against more sitting MPs, as Lok Sabha election is just at one year distance.After Narendra Modi's visit of Uttarakhand flood victims, Times of India posted on their daily, "Rambo Narendra Modi says that he saves 15000 Gujaratis". After this news there were lots of Anti-Modi people criticizing him, but Modi didn't say such like that. After some days, now Times of India apologize for that news and clarified that the news was wrong.

Radia Tapes Exposed big players from the Indian media scenario indulging in shady deals for business houses and political parties. Very recently the Jindal Group trapped a top news channel in a counter sting operation when the latter was trying to negotiate a 100 crore deal in return for suppressing news showing Jindal Groups complexity in coal scam. Editors/ Journalists have crores of assets, many are Parliamentarians, Padmashrees, in the list of Government sponsored foreign tours and having bungalows in Lutyens, New Delhi.

In the Editor's Conclave held in Kolkata, December,2016 keynote speaker, Dr Micheal Andreas Luders, journalist from Germany, said that journalism was generally seen as an 'unruly profession 'across the globe. It was not trustworthy and most journalists were happy to be part of the mainstream rather than question the establishment on various issues. He said the internet has opened a new space for ideas but, at the same time, it has led to a collapse of incomes from advertisements. The result is that newspapers are more concerned with opinion pieces which were faster and cheaper rather than well researched articles and backgrounders.

Quite close to the Paid News concept, there is a new build up- Fake News and Negativity. A few cases only in March, 2015 will highlight the plight of journalism in the country.

2nd March, 2015, PTI: BJP MP Sadhvi Prachi calls for boycott of Aamir, Salman and Shah Rukh Khan. Truth-She was not an MP and never elected to any post on a party ticket.

2nd March, 2015, India Today: "Vladimir Putin's original name is Vaarahamihir Putr Singh"-Sadhvi Prachi. Truth-The story was taken down after a few days.

3rd March, 2015, The Times of India: LS Poll eve NAMO blitz cost BJP Rs 700 crores-ADR. Truth-.Total expenditure Rs 712 crores.

4th March, 2015, India Today/Outlook/The Economic Times: PM Narendre Modi's office among top rejecters of RTI queries. Truth-Report of year 2013-14 when Dr. Manmohan Singh was the PM.

9th March, 2015, Scroll.in: Controversial emails by Prashant Bhushan's sister that pushed AAP to breaking point. Truth- Crucial mails were intentionally omitted.

15th March, 2015, PTI: Gandhi Jayanti no longer a public holiday in Goa. Truth- It was only removed from the holiday list of Industries and Factories on demand. Not removed from Shop and Establishment Act. Story was corrected later by The Hindustan Times.

17th March, 2015, DNA: Supreme Court sets aside Modi Government's order for reservation to Jat community. Truth-Order was from the UPA government and NDA only supported the decision.

25th March, 2015, India Today (Story by Rupa Subramanium): Right Wing Groups Arrested in Mumbai Church attack. Truth-Men arrested were gamblers. The story was corrected later.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenon leads to negligence in positive news making as editors are only interested in programmes that gets them high visibility by putting a bunch of individuals against each other shouting their lungs out on trivial issues. Stories are not discovered, instead taken up only when sufficient public attention has been raised. Issues like human trafficking, drugs, and farmer suicides gets neglected. In Nagpur for Lakme Fashion Week there were 5212 eminent journalists from various media who were watching a cotton textile fashion shows when in a two hours flight distance the people who manufactured cotton were dying in debt. This incident was only reported in two local newspapers. But incidents like convoy of Smiti Irani causing an accident get good coverage even though Ms Irani was not travelling at that time with her convoy.

There are unending instances of incompetence and alarming problems in India media reporting and presentation. PCI should need punitive powers and laws required to regulate media as self regulation is definitely not working. The bodies like Broadcast Authority of India, Broadcast Education Association etc are more like labour unions interested in preserving self than some sort of regulation. Also there are options of discussion, consultations and persuasion. Harsh measures could also be considered along with implication of heavy fines, stopping of government advertisements and finally suspending licenses.

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