

Increasing Trend of Paid News in Media

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Abstract - This study finds out awareness among people about 'Paid News'. How paid news syndrome is misleading people and keeping them away from the truth. To examine it, we have conducted a sample survey of journalism students and tried to find out how much aware they are about paid news syndrome. We have also tried to find out their view about paid news syndrome. As a result of this survey, we found that people are a little bit aware of this syndrome and they do feel that they are not getting appropriate news due to paid news syndrome.

I. INTRODUCTION

'Paid news Syndrome' is not new in media, but earlier it was not so blatant. Even though the phenomenon had been long existing, it is not easy to define what exactly 'paid news' is. "It could be described as quid pro quo news and even better described as unfair and camouflaged news or advertising." In simple words, the practice of publishing news in lieu of some direct or indirect payment or benefit is called paid news.

This phenomenon was visible during elections and used to be very frequent in business and corporate coverage. But in the 2009 Assembly elections in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, it appeared in more blunt and dangerous form. Earlier only few journalists were involved in such business and that too was indirectly or covertly. But now the phenomenon has emerged as direct give and take business between media and advertisers. The difference between 'news' and 'advertisement' is vanishing rapidly. People are misguided by being served 'advertisement' in the form of 'news'.

P. Sainath in his article 'It is Shameful to Misguide People' in 'The Hindu' on December 24, 2009 called it 'Package Journalism' while Mrinal Pande in her opinion published in 'The Hindu' on November 19, 2009 named it 'Political Advertising' referring to the publication of advertisements by candidates of Maharashtra election in the form of news.

Our concern in this research is to track the change in trend that how a covert menace of paid news is being converted into an overt and dangerous form of journalism. In this article, we would also try to analyse that how the sponsored articles are taking seats in today's journalism.

A. Rationale

Facts are sacred. News is pious. These are the thoughts deep rooted inside us. Whatever we read in newspapers and listen or watch on radio and television as news, we tend to believe them and consider them authentic information. The common people rely on them and form their opinion on the basis of it.

Our elders inspire us and instruct us since our childhood to pay attention to 'news' to improve our current knowledge. In schools, there are practices to read out important news of the day after assembly. Such a strong influence of news is on common people that they decide everything in their day-to-day life on the basis of these informations. It forms the ground beneath them. Whether the price of certain commodity is increasing or reducing and if so why, what is the situation of city around them, who is the appropriate candidate for the election in the area and whom to vote. All these small informations turn big in the life of common people.

But what if such informations are not genuine, what if these are influenced by some advertisers or any direct facilitator, what if instead of proper informations people are misguided. The world around them would change and their judgment in day-to-day life would be wrong. They would fall prey to wrong decisions. Such an influence of news is there on common people. But today we are witnessing such kind of reports which are directly or indirectly influenced by some facilitators and thus tend to provide inappropriate news means not completely true news. This is a trend being visible in many newspapers these days. Many small newspapers or regional newspapers found it an easy way to make money by selling news space. The victim of this situation is obviously poor reader who is not able to distinguish between paid news and genuine news and blindly rely on each news item.

II. HISTORY OR LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'Paid News Syndrome' is known by different names in various part of world. The South Africans call it 'Payola' and more commonly 'Mshika' or 'Bahasha'. (Gabby Mgaya, 27th

Dec. 2009). In India sometimes it is called 'Paid News Syndrome' or 'Package Journalism' or 'Sponsored Journalism' or 'Political Advertisement'. None of these titles reflect the definite meaning of paid news syndrome.

It is seen that since its invention about a half century ago, political advertising on television has rapidly become a major communication vehicle in American elections.

According to one such study, Election campaign creates a rich information environment which is fuelled by media and political advertisements (Jaeho Cho, 2008).

But such political advertisements in America are much different from the distorted form of political advertisements, In USA, even though media respond to candidates and parties on how to cover campaigns, they keep in mind journalistic norms and ethics unlike in India.

In a related topic of Political Campaign in U.S., a new method fantasy theme analysis (FTA) is applied to gauge the influence of televised political campaign advertising on public. This study extends the reach of FTA in studying the visual signs and symbols of political advertising. It offers insight into how candidates and voters make policy choices (Janis Teruggi Page & Margaret E. Duffy, 2009).

In another article, it is tried to understand how the effect of political elections can be better understood when campaign activities influence citizen's news consumption. Most of the previous studies have tested the direct impact of political ads on turnout considering only the exposure to these messages. But this study tries to find the role of political conversation in citizen competence by testing an O-S-R-O-R model of campaign communication mediation (Jaeho Cho, Dhavan V. Shah, Jack M. McLead, Douglas M. Mc Lead, Rosanne M. Scholl and Melissa R. Gotlieb, 2009).

In the golden days of journalism in India, it was considered as pious as worship. Journalism was a mission, a passion. Journalists were used to write even without getting paid.

Even today the profession of journalism is deeply connected to ethics. We consider media as the 'fourth state' or 'fourth pillar of democracy'. Our newspapers use the tag lines like 'Journalism of Courage' (Indian Express), 'Let Truth Prevail', which reflects the mission or ethos associated with it.

During Emergency in 1975, the newspapers of India fought altogether for the 'freedom of speech and expression' and showed a deep ethical value.

But at that time also, there were some reporters who would

demand a 'gift' from organizers of functions, some kind of facilitation to cover any programme. Organisers even used to arrange free lunches or free gifts to allure the reporters and reporters used to write in favour or against the organizers depending upon the treatment best owed to him. These are little ripples which are still under current.

But with a growth of newspaper industry as a big business of approximately Rs. 246 billion and involvement of big business houses in this industry, this small exchange of service acquired a huge shape. For business houses, it remained a business rejecting the ethical values attached to it. The editors, who used to be decision maker, now are being replaced by managers or CEOs. As Mrinal Pande said in her article 'Hindi Media and an unreal discourse' published in 'The Hindu' on Nov. 18, 2009 – “Almost all of India's print media mandarins, trained at top business schools and hired at salaries that far exceed those paid to editors, hardly try to familiarize themselves with the socio-economic intricacies of the Indian markets through vernacular publications.”

Now the paid news can be divided into two types – Direct Paid News and Indirect Paid News.

1. **Direct Paid News:** When reporter or media house is paid directly for publishing any news in favour of the paying person or company, this is called direct paid news.
2. **Indirect Paid News:** When any news is being published or shown in lieu of an advertisement provided by the concerned company or advertiser, it is called indirect paid news. Here the payment in lieu of the publication is made by advertising revenue instead of direct paying for it.

The direct paid news had remained a phenomenon in media industry on low level. Sometimes it is found that low paid reporters usually go for such practices.

In Sierra Leone, as a result of low advertising and sales revenues, some media organizations cannot afford to pay its employees a living wage. At least 20% of newspaper journalists work entirely without pay, according to a study conducted at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

In such conditions, to support themselves, some journalists engage in 'Coasting' or 'Black enveloping' which means using blackmail or accepting payment in exchange of coverage. Coasting accounts for 30% of junior reporter's income, according to the same study. (Karin Wahl – Jorgensen and Pasco Gerald H. Temple, Global Journalist, Dec. 2006)

Sierra Leone is ranked 176th out of 177 as the poorest country in the UN's 2005 Human Development Report.

III. MEDIA NET

In India, this was practiced by smaller or regional language news media, but it didn't remain confined to them.

It is being presented now in a legalized form, which is more dangerous. In March 2003, Bennett Coleman and Company, India's largest media house launched a business idea called 'Media Net'.

It functions like a paid news desk through which, for a price, advertisers and public relations agencies can place editorial content in certain lifestyle supplements of the group's newspaper, The Times of India.

Such news items included endorsement of flop movies, fashion and lifestyle products and the promotion of hotels and restaurants by paying a certain amount. The poor reader has no clue that the report is a paid advertisement masquerading as objective report.

According to their benchmarks, the word Media net at the end of the article should be printed to inform the readers that the copy is paid news, but now-a-days even this practice is vanished.

This is not the first time that Times group has been caught indulge in such practices. It launched an online portal, India times in 2000 and had been accused of using its editorial space to promote the portal (Radhika Dhawan).

The credibility of such news is suspicious and misleading. Even if it is being reported in fashion trend or Delhi Times, people tend to believe them considering it a news item instead of advertisement and they get cheated.

The position of Media net on this is - "Media net is hardly a channel to buy your way into the Times group publications, because unlike an advertorial, editors control Medianet Edvertorials. All Medianet features are processed for print after due approval from the Medianet editor and respective editors of Metro supplements. All Medianet articles have to pass the most stringent editorial filter. So if the editor of the lifestyle or city supplement of The Times of India feels the story is not worth the advertising it is riding on, it gets dropped".

But in spite of such clarifications there is scope for corruption and wrong articles getting published in a legitimized way.

A leading tabloid Mid-Day also published the rates for purchasing editorial features in The Times of India. There was no denial by the Times group on it which proves it true.

According to Mid-Day story, for sums ranging from US \$ 45,000 to \$ 66,000 one could buy a news feature on their business, get interviewed (Where the business owner supplies the questions and answers themselves) and have their picture published on page 3 of the Bombay Times, the city supplement of The Times of India.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this research study is to find out whether people are able to detect which news is paid and which is genuine. We would also try to find out whether this trend is increasing or decreasing in the views of readers. My area of concern is whether people feel misguided by such news items or not. We would also focus on the open practice of paid news by one leading newspaper which has established a separate news desk for it. In a way it is first step to legitimize such a wrong practice.

V. METHODOLOGY

The methodology we have used for this research is sampling survey. Since the topic is related to media and we consider the media students would be most sincere and aware towards this topic, so we have selected the students of Journalism and students of Advertising and Public Relations as sample for this research.

- Area of Study - Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi
- Sampling Design - Students of Journalism and Advertising and Public Relations
- Tools and Techniques - Sample Survey; A sample of 24 students (Age group 20 to 25 years) has been taken and a survey was conducted through questionnaire

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

S.No.	Item	Response		
1	Do you know about 'paid news'.	Yes	23	95.83%
		No	1	4.16%
2	If yes, then what according to you is paid news?	Published on payment	18	75%
		News published during elections	3	12.5%
		No answer	3	12.5%
3	Are you able to differentiate between 'genuine news' and 'paid news'?	Yes	9	37.5%
		No	11	45.83%
		Sometimes	3	12.5%
4	If yes, How?	The way news is written	10	41.66%
		No answer	14	58.33%
5	Do you feel cheated by paid news?	Yes	20	83.33%
		No	4	16.66%
6	Do you think you are misguided by paid news?	Yes	18	75%
		No	6	25%
7	Do you feel that paid news are getting better coverage than genuine news items?	Yes	15	62.5%
		No	9	37.5%
8	Do you feel this phenomenon of 'Paid news' is being expanded day-by-day?	Yes	19	79.16%
		No	4	16.66%
		Don't know	1	4.16%
9	As per your opinion, what measures PCI can take to check this practice?	Suspending Newspaper	2	8.33%
		Self Regulation	5	20.83%
		Heavy Fines or stringent action	8	33.33%
		Don't know	9	37.5%
10	Do you know Media Net?	Yes	1	4.16%
		No	22	91.66%
		No Answer	1	4.16%
11	If yes, what is it?	No idea	24	100%

VI. FINDINGS

We conducted a sample survey of 24 students of Journalism and Advertising to gauge their awareness about paid news.

As an inference from this survey, we come to know that though 95.83% of the students were acquainted with the term 'Paid news', most of them (nearly 25%) were not able to explain it correctly. Some of them (nearly 37.5%) said that they could recognize paid news, while 45.83% denied any recognition of paid news.

But the most important inference is that around 83.33% students acknowledged that they were being misguided and cheated by 'paid news'. They feel that many of them could not identify the 'paid news' and get influence by the content. Most of them (around 60%) also assume that paid news are getting good cover space by the media organizations, while genuine news are considered secondary. They also consider that this phenomenon of 'paid news' is expanding day-by-day.

The most significant answer we got by this survey is about 'Media Net'. Around 92% of the students didn't hear about Media Net in spite of the fact that it existed for more than six years (2003). No one was able to describe it and its functions.

In the answer of what action PCI can take to check the practice of paid news, most of them are in favour of either stringent action or heavy fine (33.33%) or suspension of the paper (8.33%) or self regulation (20.83%). Altogether at least 62.5% people want an action on the concerned newspaper.

This shows how ignorant the students of Journalism and Advertising are about this growing menace in journalism, what to talk about general public. The Times of India was suppose to give the credit line of Media Net after each item done by this particular desk, but it is not following this system. So it has become very difficult to distinguish which news is 'paid' and which is not.

VII. DISCUSSION

By the findings of the survey, we come to know that though people know the existence of 'Paid news', they do not want to be misguided and cheated by them. They know the advertisements are major source of revenue for the newspapers; they still buy a newspaper for its editorial content or news report not for its advertisements.

The advertisement revenue has become the main revenue base for the press. In the case of the metropolitan press, it accounts for about 70-80% of its total revenue. So space in newspapers is disproportionately occupied by the advertisements. The advertisements have also changed the policy and outlook of the newspapers in more than one way. With the rapid growth of advertisements by way of Corporate Communication and for luring potential consumers, the revenue earning of a newspaper from such advertisements is very often quite robust (Justice G.N. Ray, Jan 10, 2010).

According to Justice Ray, "In the media, malpractices operate in both explicit and implicit forms. Yellow Journalism and blackmail were the known forms of corruption in journalism. But in today's media functioning, subtle and implicit form of corruption is creating greater mischief".

It is true that this is not an easy time for media working under the pressure of advertisers, but a leading newspaper with circulation of 21 million, which is largest selling broadsheet in the world need not to follow such profit making practices.

The result of survey has also shown that at least 62.5% people want a strong action on the media organization which indulge in paid news syndrome and considered it as a menace. This shows the dissatisfaction among people regarding paid news.

IX. CONCLUSION

The distorted form of news by 'paid news syndrome' has suppressed the ethical values of journalism in India and has become a regular feature. People are strongly feeling against this malpractice and it could convert into disillusion of them from media. Whatever newspapers publish, a credibility and authenticity value is attached to it for which people buy the newspapers. If these values would be sacrificed for advertisements, then nothing will be left in the newspaper for readers.

The owners of media houses, who indulge in such practices, should not forget that if their readership would decrease, then the advertisers would also run away from them.

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