

# Paid news, a deep-seated malaise

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**T**he practice of paid news is not a recent phenomenon. It was blatantly evident in the Assembly and the Lok Sabha elections. It has been there all along in the coverage of corporates also. Earlier, it was limited to a few journalists, and covertly. It has now become an overt and institutionalised affair, as if there was nothing unusual or deviant about this. It has now reached the proportion of being described as “fourth estate on sale” (EPW). This practice is no longer limited to smaller or regional language news media. It is happening all across the news media. Like ‘overzealous ad managers,’ there are overzealous journalists. This practice, if not addressed now, will become formally overt as a normal course of the news media’s function.

It is difficult to define paid news. It could also be described as quid pro quo news, it may even be better described as unfair or camouflaged news or advertising. It may not always be possible to establish something as unfair or camouflaged. But it should be possible to develop a methodology even without circumstantial evidence. There could be an independent monitoring and analysis arrangement in a transparent way for a six-month period before a Legislative Assembly election. An ASCI-like arrangement could be mobilised by the Press Council of India (PCI) and the Election Commission of India (ECI) together. Various bodies like the Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF) and the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) should also be involved in formulating guidelines. But they should not wait for a consensus.

Much-talked-about political reforms, particularly electoral reforms, are yet to see the light. In the meanwhile, everyone knows how money and media power in India’s electoral politics has been on the increase. The ‘note for vote’ phenomenon nationwide is hardly a secret. Transparency by way of disclosures both by political parties and contesting candidates is vital. The ECI’s measures to restrain money power and

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media power should be viewed as well within its purview. In a democracy, free and fair elections and a free press are equally important. Each should sustain the vibrancy of the other.

The situation calls for protective measures and corrective initiatives by news media themselves in their own interest and by other stakeholders in civil society. No single initiative or measure can curb such deviant behaviour; a combination is required in the spirit of “checks and balance.” The best bet, of course, is a more active audience and citizenry. But in the absence of such sustained activism, three-pronged efforts are needed. First, from within news media, individually, and as a Fourth Estate institution. Secondly, from professional bodies like academics, independent research and civil society groups. Lastly, from regulatory agencies like the PCI, the ECI, the Information Commission, and the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI).

## Series of initiatives needed

1. *Dependence on ratings/ranking:* There are by corporate instruments, not editorial ones. Discussions on the pros and cons of this syndrome need to be encouraged and promoted so that more reliable and relevant criteria can be evolved in such a way that the credibility of the news media is retained.

2. *Disclosure practice:* This should happen at two levels. One, news media must state any conflict of interests in the course of news coverage and presentation. The media should also disclose their own ethical code or standards. They should indicate the responsible person for such disclosures periodical-

ly, like the readers’ editor, ombudsman or a panel of internal and external experts. The disclosure should also be of revenues, linkages with other industries and corporates, and shareholding in other media. Disclosure should be built into the reporting pattern as well, as *Mint* has been doing for a couple of years. The news media, for example, should report on their own how much space and time they have devoted to commercials in the previous quarter or six months. Editors too could disclose their assets voluntarily and periodically in their own interest.

3. *Redressal arrangements:* Complaints about any aspect of media operations have positive implications — for content. There should be some provision for readers and viewers to “write back” or “talk back” and for an explanation in turn by the person responsible in the news media. The Readers Editor of *The Hindu* has set a good precedent in taking note of complaints and explaining wherever necessary, as he did in the case of the paid news phenomenon. News media should promote such arrangement so that readers and viewers are aware of it. This is over and above what the state agencies are expected to do. In the more specific context of paid news during elections, the Election Commission should be both proactive and also take on measures to curb such practices on its own and preferably with the Press Council of India.

4. *Media watch:* Academic bodies, independent research agencies, and civil society groups should be encouraged to monitor media contents and articulate their views from time to time. Several such independent media watch groups are needed in the coun-

try. Basic data based on trends of space and time for advertisements and analysis of ad content is essential for preventive initiatives. The Centre for Media Studies (CMS) has been doing this. In fact, way back in 1995, it came up with the description, “marketing media not mass media.” And in 2001 it brought out a publication for the first time, “Paradigm shifts in media operations.”

5. Professional bodies engaged or associated with news media in various capacities like the Editors Guild, the Advertising Standards Council of India, journalists associations, and the Indian Broadcasters Foundation, should take the initiative towards a more responsible and accountable news media. This can be done by setting up their own panel, as the Editors Guild did in the case of paid news and codes or guidelines for their members, particularly on conflict of interest.

6. State bodies like the Press Council of India, the Information Commissions, TRAI, and the Election Commission of India need to be proactive. Only then can they play their role. But their taking up deviations by individual news media organisations is equally important. The Press Council should come up with guidelines after involving the media across the country (even if a consensus is not possible) and the Election Commission should take the responsibility to implement the guidelines.

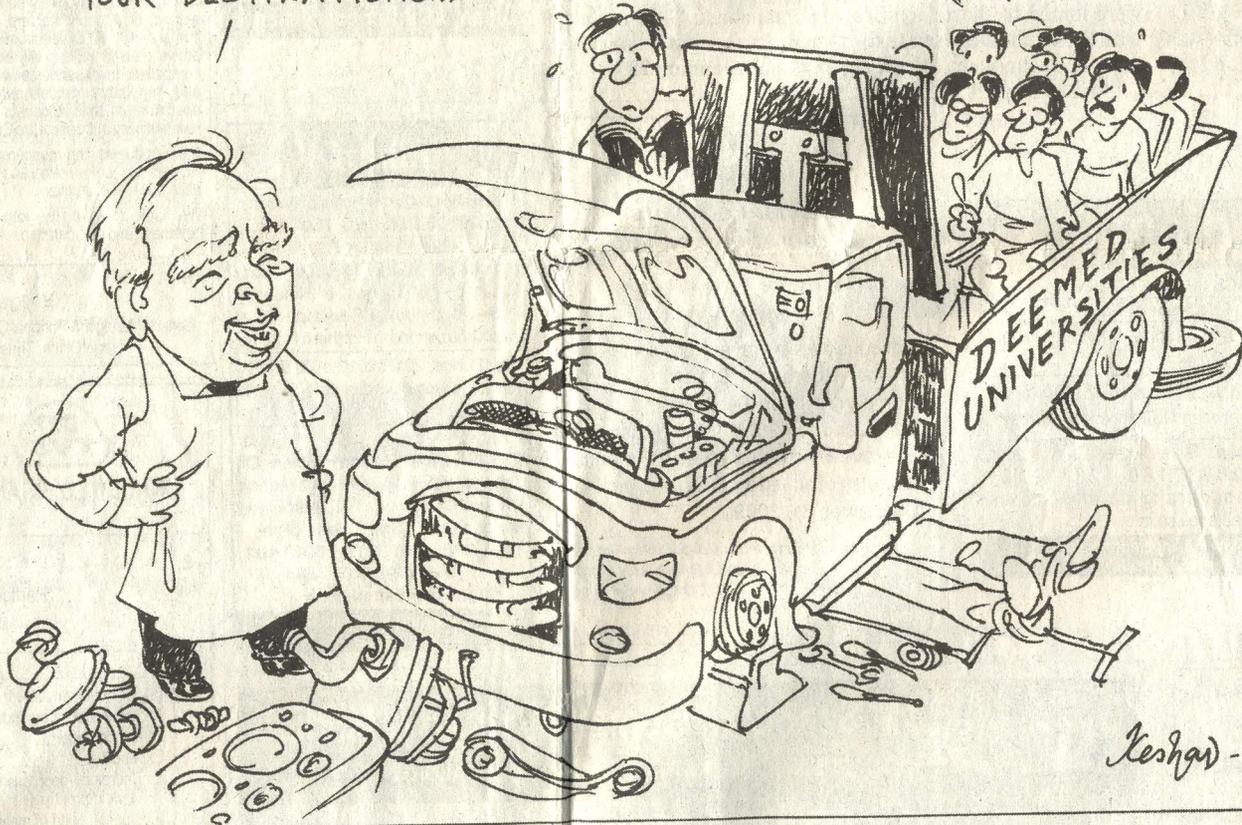
7. The media should be brought under the Right to Information Act (RTI) so that some accountability comes into media operations and managements.

8. Government media campaigns, other than on specific occasions, should be discouraged six months before elections.

9. Real-time counselling services should be provided to individual journalists, political leaders, and candidates in specific situations on how they should go about their tasks in a given context. Such counselling can be by an independent body but specialised.

10. Guidelines, however broad, for the news media on poll coverage should be formulated. Television channels and newspapers should be viewed together in relation to their coverage of candidates, parties, issues, and campaigns.

DON'T WORRY -  
YOU ALL WILL REACH  
YOUR DESTINATIONS...



...together in relation to their coverage of candidates, parties, issues, and campaigns.

11. Limits on ads either in terms of percentage of space or time or in terms of percentage of revenue from commercials can be considered. Such limits may not be legally sustainable but could come through a voluntary industrial effort. Apart from this, advertisements of all kinds should be positioned distinctly to demarcate them from the edited space and time the same way as facts and comments are demarcated from news reporting.

**Conclusion**

The practice of paid news or camouflaged news or advertising is not limited to election times. It was not something new, which was encountered for the first time, during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. The practice has been there in many different contexts and for much longer. It is not always possible to isolate such coverage. Circumstantial evidence may not always be available. Nevertheless, guidelines can be worked out for an independent monitoring and analysis arrangement in a transparent way. By not taking cognisance even when the practice has been brought to public notice, the concerned agencies have failed and professional bodies have gone along. The malaise lies much deeper. As free and fair elections are as important as a free and independent press, correctives are needed in our electoral process too. The issues involved need to be addressed comprehensively and the 'cleaning wounds' approach will have only a temporary effect.

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