

## Research Paper

## Mass Communication



## Media – Should Be a Watch Dog and Not a Lap Dog

\* Mrs. ASHWINI

\* ASSISTANT PROFESSOR and HOD, Department of Journalism, Dr. G. Shankar Government Women's First Grade College, Ajjarakadu, Udupi – 576101

### ABSTRACT

*This is an analytical paper on the media environment existing in our nation. Here the author attempts to establish the relationship existing between politics and media. The paper tries to highlight the rift existing between responsibility of media and the actual functioning of media in our society today.*

*Media is called as the fourth estate of a society. It is believed that the status of a nation can be understood by analyzing the extent of freedom enjoyed by media in that nation. Media has huge social responsibility over its shoulders. But when we look at the way media is functioning today, it becomes crystal clear that responsibility is lacking. Media is turning out to be a business enterprise rather than a service sector.*

*With this background, it becomes highly necessary for us to analyze the causes responsible for this scenario. Politics and media walk hand in hand. In a way both are interdependent; two faces of the same coin. Still a cold war exists underneath. Several negative developments have also stepped into 'media and politics' as a whole and this paper make an attempt to understand the same.*

*Few of the key words used in the paper are Public opinion, paid news, advertorial, media credibility.*

**Keywords : Public opinion, paid news, package deal, trust barometer survey, advertorial, media credibility, Press Council of India**

### OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- To understand the role of media in a democratic set up
- To understand how media shapes and moulds public opinion
- To throw light on paid news, a negative trend in media
- To analyze the expectations out of media and the actual functioning of media in the current society

"The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter"

- Thomas Jefferson, Third US President

The above quoted statement by Jefferson throws light on the importance of media in a nation. The responsibility and importance of media becomes manifold in a democratic country like India. Here media must function like a bridge between government and public. However, it is very important for this bridge to remain strong and neutral without slanting towards one side.

Media took birth in India with a definite purpose of providing education and creating awareness. Today priorities have undergone change. Providing entertainment and gaining more TRP has become the sole objective of media. Political education and awareness can be created among mass through media. Even to this day media takes a lion's share in creating or moulding public opinion.

All political activities and issues get conveyed to the public through media. It's the only opening available for public to

peep into the world of politics. But this opening is not devoid of various influencing factors. In most places there will be two step flow of information. Information gets passed from media to opinion leaders (can be politicians, local leaders, educationalists etc) and then to the public. Decision making of the public depends on message passed by both media and opinion leaders. Biased or misleading message by them can lead to public taking wrong decisions which in turn can spoil the future of a nation.

Here I will provide a few examples to substantiate this point.

- It can be in terms of electing inefficient or incapable representatives: many times wrong people get into the power house because of the wrong or misleading image created by media. Media must highlight and help the public in understanding the real credentials of every politician.
- \*Michael Moore talks about the capacity of media in creating public opinion in his documentary 'Fahrenheit 9/11'. After the attack on World Trade Centre, George W. Bush was criticized. In his documentary he says how the US president was disinterested in matters of grave importance. Despite that he won the 2004 elections. Moore questions, "How was this possible? Were the public fooled into re-electing?" He says it was the influence of political culture of US at that time that made it possible.
- \*It is known to all of us how media shaped the public opinion during Iraq war. People were convinced that US was right in waging war on Iraq. The reality was exposed much later and the entire picture changed.

\*University of Maryland conducted a study on American public opinion. It came up with shocking results

- Fifty seven percent of mainstream media viewers believed the falsity that Iraq gave substantial support to Al-Qaida, or was directly involved in the September 2011 attacks (48% after invasion)

- Sixty nine percent believed the falsity that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 2011 attacks
- Twenty two percent believed the falsity that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq. (Twenty one percent believed that chemical/bio weapons had actually been used against US soldiers in Iraq during 2003)
- In the composite analysis of the PIPA(Programme on International Policy Attitudes) study, 80% of Fox news watchers had one or more of these misperceptions, in contrast to 71% for CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) and 27% who tuned to NPR (National Public Radio)/PBS (Public Broadcasting Service)

\*Source: ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media\\_coverage\\_of\\_the\\_Iraq\\_war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_coverage_of_the_Iraq_war))

24/7 news channels can provide better analysis and interpretation of political issues. With huge time at hand, channels can conduct more and more panel discussions on matters of grave importance and then interpret it in detail to the public. Sadly, at times panel discussion turns out to be chaotic and goes out of moderator's control. Instances of reporter cutting in between guest speaker's talk and winding up the discussion for lack of time is also common. This creates confusion among the public on the matter of discussion.

\*\*As Narayana Swamy, Senior Journalist from Indian Express opines, Media is increasingly becoming the 'handmaid' of politicians and business houses and losing focus on real issues in pursuit of profits prompting an urgent need for paid news menace to be isolated, treated and removed.

\*\*\*([http://in.news.yahoo.com/20/20101009/1416/tnl-paid-news-syndrome-needs-to-be-remov\\_1.html](http://in.news.yahoo.com/20/20101009/1416/tnl-paid-news-syndrome-needs-to-be-remov_1.html))

\*\*\*There are numerous instances of paid news in political scenario. P.Sainath, Rural affairs editor of 'The Hindu' wrote a series of articles highlighting the manner in which the electoral campaign of Maharashtra Chief Minister Shri Ashok Chavan was conducted in September – October 2009. The details are provided below along with a table.

- Ashok's account of advertising campaign says he spent around 11,000 rupees. Sainath pointed out that in reality he spent crores of rupees to get huge full page coverage especially in Maharashtra Times, Pudhari and Lokmat.\* (Pay to Print – Sainath, P, on google)
- P.Kodanda Rama Rao, Loksatta party candidate for Andhra Pradesh said he paid 50,000 rupees to Eenadu for favourable articles. However, newspapers denied it.
- Harayana Chief Minister revealed that he approached leading newspaper of his state with money for positive stories after learning that newspaper had signed a package deal with his rivals to print negative stories.
- Top management executive from Punjab Kesari declared that the newspaper made between 10 – 12 crores during assembly election session.

The president of Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists, Mr. D. Somasundar studied the extent of 'Paid news' in West Godavari District and concluded that almost all Telugu newspapers did a big amount of money by open advertisements and paid news.

**Table 1**

Newspaper	Advertisements (Number)	Space (Sq cm)	Paid news (number)	Space (Sq cm)	Rate per Sq Cm
Eenaadu	94	16439	92	23637	Rs. 115
Andhra Jyothi	87	11145	163	38372	Rs. 90
Vaaritha	47	7071	82	15327	-
Saakshi	76	10905	114	26494	Rs. 100
Surya	44	3485	141	24935	Rs. 65
Andhra Bhumi	17	2329	48	10528	Rs. 30

\*\*\*Source: (<http://indiacurrentaffairs.org/false-propaganda-for-a-price-unethical-practices-of-media-in-general-elections-2009/>)

#### \*\*\*\*PACKAGE DEAL

Newspapers do offer several packages. There are a number of options available and one can work our permutations and combinations to achieve maximum benefits.

- ✓ Regularly writing favourably on front page
- ✓ Writing favourably in regular succession on front page
- ✓ Writing regularly with colour photos all through the campaign session, i.e., from date of nomination to the date of polling with interviews, news analysis, campaign trails etc
- ✓ A package to write favourably and also to do negative campaign against rival candidates
- ✓ An informative interview of the candidate with photos

\*\*\*\*Source: (<http://indiacurrentaffairs.org/false-propaganda-for-a-price-unethical-practices-of-media-in-general-elections-2009/>)

These are just a few examples. It is just the tip of the Iceberg. As a result, public credibility on media is going down the ladder.

\*\*\*\*\*Edelman, a PR firm conducted 'Trust Barometer Survey' in 2010. The survey was conducted in 22 countries including India. It states that Indian media has been losing credibility and trust. The study sampled 1,575 people in the age group of 25 – 64 and 200 opinion leaders. The findings of the research are as follows

Over the past 2 years trust in  
TV has gone down from **61% to 36%**  
Business Magazines from **72% to 47%**  
Newspapers from **61% to 40%**

\*\*\*\*\*Source: <http://www.yourstory.in/news/3249-2010-edelman-trust-barometers-india-findings>)

This is a matter of serious concern and the matter needs immediate attention. If the matter is not dealt properly at the earliest, percentage of people doubting the media will go up.

#### RAY OF HOPE

As per the rules by election commission no politician must spend more than 16 lakh rupees for campaigning. But in reality amount spent will run into several crores.

- ✓ The election commission appointing a committee to review or check paid news during elections can work wonders, if sincere output is provided.
- ✓ The committee must engage in field research and get details of corrupt methods followed during election campaign
- ✓ The latest decision by election commission of monitoring the moves of every politician through video coverage can also help in curtailing corruption
- ✓ Press council of India must be empowered to take action

and award suitable punishment to media organizations to mention non-news item as advertisement; it is rarely followed. Paid news item or advertorial must be mentioned clearly for the public to distinguish between news and non-news material

- ✓ Transparency must be maintained in media organizations also. The advertising accounts and profit sheets of media houses must be checked. This helps in understanding the amount of money flowing from political parties or candidates to media houses.

Time will say how successful it will be...

## REFERENCES

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