



The Role of Media in Good Governance: Paid News Culture of Media and the Challenges to Indian Democracy

P. Ashraf

School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, INDIA

Available online at: www.isca.in

Received 30th December 2013, revised 15th January 2014, accepted 9th March 2014

Abstract

The active and vigilant participation of mass media is essential in a democratic society. It is an important assumption that the Media speaks for the people, represents the interests of the society, and serves as a check on the government. This process holds government accountable and transparent. Through this function the media helps to ensure good governance. But in changed social milieu the sanctity of media has been questioned in every society. As a largest democracy, it is very alarming in India. The menace of Paid news is the latest and much discussing moth-eaten condition in the sphere of mass media in the country. The phenomenon of 'paid news' goes further beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media institutions. In this situation how can the media discharge their watchdog function in a democratic system?. How the Media can speak for the people, represents the interests of the society. And how can ensure the good governance? These are some questions and deliberations that the paper put forward.

Keywords: Democracy, good governance, media, paid news, corruption.

Introduction

The watchdog function of media is essential in a democratic society where people must know what their governments are doing. The primary democratic function of the media is to act as a check on the state. The media should observe the activities of the state, and fearlessly expose exploitations of official authority¹. It is an important assumption is that the Media speaks for the people, represents the interests of the society, and serves as a check on the government. This process Holds government accountable; makes visible what it is doing, so that people can judge. Through this function the media helps to ensure good governance in a democratic system. Good governance entails the principles of transparency, accountability and participation. Democracy is the government which rest on the active consent of the governed². As an important source of public information Media could be expected to be a vehicle to encourage the promotion of these principles of good governance.

But in the changed social milieu, the sanctity of the media has been questioned from various corners. Along with the transformation of the media from a mission to a profession, then to a business, its role in democratic system also has been transformed. Like any other business, the profit has become the ultimate goal of the media industry. The menace of Paid news is latest and much discussing topic related to the deviation of media industry from its fundamental functions in India. In this new age of paid news how can we expect justice from the media?. How the media can discharge their watchdog function in a democratic system?

What is 'Governance'?

The concept of "governance" as old as human civilization. But recently the scope and the meaning of the term have been much expanded. Because of this, there is no consensus on the definition and the scope of the term of governance. There is no unity among the scholars and the funding agencies over the term govern. The World Bank gives two definitions to the term governance. The first definition is exclusively related to the exercise of political power to deal with the nation's affairs. The focal point of the second definition is the use of power in the management of a state's social and economic resources for development.

To sum up governs is a process of decision making and the procedures by which decisions implemented or not implemented. The Oxford dictionary defines governance as the act or method of governing, of exercising control or authority over the actions of subjects, a system of regulation. At the same time the governments is one of the actors in governance. The military, civil society organizations, media, political parties, and NGOs are the other actors in the process of Governance³.

What is 'Good Governance'?

The origin of the concept of Good Governance can be traced back to the Ancient Greek period if we catch the essence of Aristotle's fundamental statement that "the state came in to existence for the sake of mere life, but continued for the sake of good life". If we look in to the term "good life" we can traced out the components of Good Governance which we discussed in modern time. The political philosophers like Hobbs, Lock and

Rousseau also mentioned the necessity of the Good governance through their social contract theories of the origin of the state. According to John Lock governments shall govern as long as they can protect the interest of the people or the trust of the people has placed in them⁴. this is how the concept of democracy rule by consent and good governance came in to existence in the theory and practice of the governments. .The World Bank defines: "Good governance is epitomized by predictable and enlightened policy making; a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law"⁵.

Role of Media in Democracy and Good Governance

Media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy and ensuring good governs. As an important source of information media has been functioning the role of the heart of democratic society and Good governance. According to Norris, the media has three key roles in contributing to democratization and good governance. The very vital function of media is to act as a watchdog over the powerful, promoting accountability, transparency and public scrutiny. The second important role of media is to function as a civic forum for political debate, facilitating informed electoral choices and actions; and the third function is to act as an agenda-setter for policy makers, strengthening government responsiveness for instance to social problems and to exclusion⁶.

In their 'watchdog' role, the media can play an important role to promote transparency, accountability, and public scrutiny of decision-makers, by highlighting policy failures, maladministration by public officials, corruption in the judiciary, and scandals in the corporate sector⁷. Investigative journalism can open the government's secret records to external scrutiny and critical evaluation, and hold authorities answerable for their actions. The Media also exposes maneuverings and abuses of fundamental human rights. It is also castigate elections rigging and offer objective assessments of the process and results of elections and offer recommendations for improvement. The media also has a critical role to mediate between the state and citizens through the debates and discussions about the major issues of the day and informing people about the stand of their leaders on such issues. If the channels of communication reflect the cultural and social pluralism and diversity of the society, in a fair and balanced manner, then only various opinion and different voices can be heard I public debates.

Democracy requires that people should have the right to know all the activities of the government, particularly the decisions of the government that affects their life, liberty and property. Information is very vital for people to make decisions regarding their involvement in the State and the civil society. Adequate information helps the citizens to decide sensibly and take the

right course of action favorable to them. Media thus helps people to know what is happening around the world and socialise them with the values of pluralism. By publicizing information the media also make public services more responsive to the people⁸. Media has been playing a crucial role in protection of rights by making people aware of their rights. Media also making people to vigilant on political developments in the world and helping to stimulate debate drawing attention to all social evils including the institutional failures, corruption, inefficiency and illegal activities.

The Paid News and Media

Corruption in mass media is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as the media itself. India is not an exemption in this general statement. The media is a part of the existing society. If there is corruption in society, it would be illogical to expect the media to be free of all types of corruption. But, corruption in media was very minimal while comparing to executive and legislature. It was only an exceptional case and the journalists had been very cautious to keep a distance from such practices. Media houses were also very keen to keep their dignity. But in recent years, corruption in media has gone way beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media institutions. Today the corruption in media has become much more institutionalized and organized forms of corruption wherein media receive funds for publicizing information in favor of particular individuals, corporate entities, leaders of political parties and candidates contesting elections, that is sought to be disguised as "news". The prominent politicians and many eminent journalists have pointed out dangerous of the paid news. The Press Councils report quotes opposition leader in Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj's statement that the paid news threat had started out as an aberration, went on to become a disease and is now an epidemic.

What is Paid News

Paid news is those articles in newspapers, magazines and the stories in electronic media, which indicate favorable conditions for the individuals or institutions that has paid for it. These kinds of news are much like an advertisement, but without the 'ad tag'. It has existed for long decades, but what is actually causing concern is that recently the practice appears to be getting institutionalized, not by dishonest individual reporters, but rather by the media organisations themselves. The press council has pointed out this issue in its last report on paid news. The report says "The phenomenon of 'paid news' goes beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media companies. It has become pervasive, structured and highly organized and in the process, is undermining democracy in India"⁹. The report also says that the culture of paid news has become widespread across media in all over the country. The private treaties are another technique of paid news. Private Treaties" involve deals where corporates pay media companies in shares for advertising, plus other, favorable treatment. SEBI "felt that such

brand building strategies of media groups, without appropriate and adequate disclosures, may not be in the interest of investors and financial markets as the same would impede in them taking a fair and well-informed decision”¹⁰. 'Paid news' syndrome is a threat capable of eating into the fundamental principles of a free and fair media and rooting it out is necessary for the healthy democracy and good governance.

How the corrupted Media Undermines Democracy and Good Governance

News is to be obviously objective, fair and unbiased and it should be keep a clear distance from advertisements. What happens when the difference between news and advertisements start blurring, or when "news" is published in favor of a particular politician or corporate giants by selling editorial spaces?. In such situations, the reader or the viewer can hardly discriminate between news reports and advertisements. As results the readers or viewers are being confusing by the media with their wrong and misleading information. Ultimately these practices are undermined the very essence of democracy and the role of the people in decision making process.

The paid news is a serious threat to democracy and good governance. It affects the democratic process in various ways. Firstly, with paid news, the media being compelled to surrender its independence. A media without independence is nothing more than a palm let of the authorities or interest groups. Secondly with paid news the media deceives the citizens. The reader of the press or the viewer of the television is betrayed into believing that what is basically an advertisement is in fact, independently produced news content. Ultimately this practice do harm to the decision making process in a democratic society. How can people judge to the government without proper information?. The third important question is related to media's role in protection of human rights. No market regulated media can discharge their responsibility to the masses. Their every action might be regulated by the strings of advertisement. When media is being compelled to protect the corporate interests, naturally this will lead to right violation of the vulnerable sections in the society.

Above all the paid news culture of media undermines the entire democratic process in the country. The paid news practices are very active in election pried. Many candidates are not willing to declare the expenditure incurred on planting "paid news" items. Through this process, the candidate standing for election violates the Conduct of Election Rules. With the huge influence of paid news in the Media organizations, more and more editors today have turned their attention away from readers' interest in news and views to the promotion of their publishers' financial achievements. The sad effect is to make press coverage of news and views insufficient and thin, to focus less on issues and more on personalities, to concentrate on today's sensations but neglect follow-ups¹¹.

Conclusion

The participation and understanding of every member of the society is inevitable to the function of parliamentary democracy. It is also very vital to ensure good governance. The free and fair media is the single most prerequisites of the good governance. But a large number of existing media, cannot take up this responsibility because of the market influence on media industry.

The phenomenon of "paid news" endangers the functioning of independent media in the country and the working of strong democracy and good governance. It is a serious threat to Indian polity. In this context, the media should have to introspect whether such practices will do any advantage to the society and the media industry itself. The advertisements should be clearly apparent from editorial matters. Credibility is life air of Media. Media should realize that if it does not have integrity it will cease to exist. They should be free from any kind of influence from various pressure groups. They should be keep a distance from any kinds of political and commercial control. Above all the media should be equipped with the essential investigative power to bring out the truths to the public and discharge their functions in promoting good governance.

References

1. Curran James, Media and Power, London and New York, Rutledge, (2002)
2. Strong C., Modern political constitution, London: Sidgewick and Jackson (1972)
3. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific, what is Good Governance? <http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp> (2012)
4. Sabine George, History of Political Theory, New York: Hault, Rineheart and Wintson (1961)
5. Yadav Lal Babu, Role of Media in Promoting Good Governance, <http://www.jdhr.org/publications/media-and-development> (2001)
6. Norris P., The Role of the free press in promoting democratization, good governance and human development, New York: UNESCO (2006)
7. George A Donohue, Philip Tichenor et al, 'A Guard Dog Perspective on the Role of the Media.' *Journal of Communication*, 45(2), 115-128 (1995)
8. Yadav Lal Babu, Role of Media in Promoting Good Governance, <http://www.jdhr.org/publications/media-and-development> (2001)
9. Paid News: How corruption in the Indian media undermines Indian democracy. www.thehindu.com/openion/columns/sainath/paidnews (2013)
10. Sainath P., Paid news pandemic undermines democracy, The Hindu, Kochi, 10 May (2013)
11. J B D'Souza, Journalism: Profit over People, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(19), 1597-1598 (2000)