

News is meant to be objective, fair and neutral – this is what sets apart such information and opinion from advertisements that are paid for by corporate entities, governments, organizations or individuals. What happens when the distinction between news and advertisements start blurring, when advertisements double up as news that have been paid for, or when “news” is published in favour of a particular politician by selling editorial spaces?

In such situations, a section of the reader or the viewer can hardly distinguish between news reports and advertisements/advertorials. Marketing executives use the services of journalists – willingly or otherwise – to gain access to political personalities. So-called “rate cards” or “packages” are distributed that often include “rates” for publication of “news” items that not merely praise particular candidates but also criticize their political opponents. Candidates who do not go along with such practices on the part of media organizations may be denied coverage. Sections of the media in India have willy-nilly become participants and players in such practices that contribute to the growing use of money power in politics which undermines democratic processes and norms – while hypocritically pretending to occupy a high moral ground. This has not merely undermined democracy in India but also tarnished the country's reputation.

Identical articles with photographs and headlines have appeared in competing publications carrying by-lines of different authors around the same time. On the same page of specific newspapers, articles have been printed praising competing candidates claiming that both are likely to win the same elections. Nowhere is there any indication that the publication of such “news” reports has entailed financial transactions or has been sponsored by certain individuals or political parties. When confronted with circumstantial evidence that substantiate allegations of “paid news”, the standard reaction of individuals accused of corrupt practices is to pretend that nothing untoward has happened since the evidence is circumstantial in nature. The typical response of representatives of political parties as well as media organizations, is to flatly deny these allegations. In private, however, these very same people acknowledge that the cancer of “paid news” has spread deep into the country's body politic and needs to be removed.

Realising the dangers of “paid news” to democracy as well as the right to freedom of expression enshrined in Article 19 of the Constitution of India, on June 9, 2009, the Press Council of India appointed a Sub-Committee comprising Shri Paranjay Guha Thakurta and Shri Kalimekolam Sreenivas Reddy “to examine the phenomenon of paid news observed during the last Lok Sabha elections...based on inputs received from the members and others.”