

### General Studies – 2; Topic: Functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional Bodies

#### Paid News in India

##### 1) Introduction

- The Press Council of India (PCI) defines paid news as any news or analysis appearing in print or electronic media for consideration in cash or kind.
- This type of news is typically sponsored by politicians, businessmen, and celebrities in order to improve their public image or accomplish political goals.
- The Election Commission of India has detected hundreds of cases where politicians paid newspapers or TV channels to carry favourable reports.

##### 2) Reasons for rise in paid news

- Corporatisation of media
- Owners having themselves the editorial roles.
- Decline in autonomy of editors/journalists due to emergence of contract system and poor wage levels of journalists
- Lack of restriction on ownership across media segments or between content and distribution could give rise to monopolistic practices.

##### 3) Why Paid news is an electoral offence

- Affects people's rational thinking and opinion which gets reflected in their voting patterns.
- Undermines free and fair elections, which distort the working of the democracy.
- Richer candidates who could pay for their publicity has a clear advantage
- The win of capitalism or financial capacity over morals, principles, ethics, and ideologies enshrined in the constitution.
- Publishing the candidates' views as news items and bringing out negative news items against rival candidates during the elections.

##### 4) Role of Media

- The Indian media plays the role of constructive opposition in the Parliament as well as in various Legislative Assemblies of the states.
- Journalists are, by and large, honoured and accepted as the moral guide in the Indian society.
- For democratic India, the media continues to be acclaimed as the fourth important pillar after the judiciary, parliament and bureaucratic set-up.
- Its role as a protector of public interest and enforcer of accountability.

##### 5) Concerns / Challenges

- Paid news is a grave election malpractice and is not recognized as an offence by Representation of Peoples Act.
- In many cases, money spent on paid news is not represented in elections expenditure and is a punishable offence.
- There has been a lot of discussion on paid news including a parliamentary standing committee report on the subject, yet there is no consensus on how to deal with the problem.
- Exiting regulatory set-up dealing with paid news is inadequate.

- Universally profit-maximizing entities will act to increase returns rather than look at social externalities.

### 6) **Way Forward**

- It is a reminder for the amendment of RPA Act, 1951.
- A legal framework in which electoral issues are expeditiously adjudicated must also be put in place if election law is to be enforced in both letter and spirit.
- Define what constitutes paid political news, so that Press Council of India can adopt appropriate guidelines.
- Periodic review of the editor/journalist autonomy and wage conditions.
- Financial accounts of the media houses should be subject to examination, especially the revenue source for a suspected paid news case.
- Regulator(s) should have the power to take strong action against offenders and should not include media owners/interested parties as members.
- Transparent and unbiased policy for distribution of advertisements by the central and state governments, with provisions for scrutiny.
- Conduct study to evaluate the mechanism adopted by other countries to tackle the problem of paid news.
- Naming and shaming of media houses involved in paid news.
- In India, a more alert citizenry can make a difference by bringing the problem of paid news to the public domain.

