



Journalism in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview

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Abstract

COVID-19 is not just a health crisis. It has disrupted the economy of the entire world. Like most sectors, it has brought massive changes to the field of journalism. The objective of the article is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on journalism in Bangladesh. This study follows a qualitative research methodology based on secondary sources. The study's findings have shown that the pandemic situation has strongly affected the journalism industry and their work in Bangladesh. Many local newspapers have been severely affected by losses in advertising revenues from coronavirus. Advertisements have gone down by 70-80% despite an increase in television and online media viewership. COVID-19 has infected 1,010 journalists from 191 media houses in Bangladesh. Among these, 942 people have been recovered and 35 journalists passed away till November 15. Prior to COVID-19, few journalists were in financial crisis due to non-receipt of regular salary allowance; this crisis has become more evident during the pandemic situation. At least 600 journalists have been discharged and many journalists have been given compulsory leave without pay. Despite all the hurdles, Bangladeshi journalists continued to contribute to information gathering, dissemination and raising public awareness.



Article History

Received: 07 January 2021

Accepted: 23 March 2021

Keywords

Bangladeshi Journalists;
Covid-19;
Journalism;
Media;
Risk Situation.

Introduction

The recent coronavirus pandemic has created a dire situation around the world. Since the identification of the first COVID-19 patient in Bangladesh on 8 March, journalists have been raising public awareness about the virus, as well as, updating

readers with the latest news. However, due to the prevalence of COVID-19, the journalism industry is in deep crisis, much like the other sectors of the country. At present, there are various types of media in Bangladesh. As of December, 2020, the number of newspapers registered in Bangladesh

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Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.4.1.05>

is 3210 (excluding online media) out of which 1357 are published from Dhaka and 1853 from other districts.¹ There are also 34 television channels, 22 FM radios, 17 community radios including 4 state-controlled channels.² In addition to the conventional broadsheet newspapers, there are online based media outlets and most printed newspapers have online editions. About 90% of journalists work in urban districts while the rest 10% report from rural areas.³ However, due to the pandemic, many newspapers in Bangladesh have been forced to shut down publishing. This has increased the uncertainty involved in the profession and the livelihood of local journalists is in much greater jeopardy than ever before. The sector is going through a crisis including layoffs, irregular salaries, arrears of salary, death of journalists, torture.⁴

In such a situation, it is necessary to discuss what kind of challenges Bangladeshi journalists are facing during the pandemic, and how can the situation be mediated since journalism or the media is an institution with which individuals, societies, states and the international system have a deep and meaningful interdependent relationship.⁵ So the present study has been conducted for the purpose of exploring the impact and means of improving the ongoing situation on journalism in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Shalvee and Saurabh (2020) examined the different role of mass media to make people awareness during COVID-19 pandemic. Using an online survey method they gathered data and found that media are faced many challenges at ground level in spreading information to the people despite media play a significant role and most of the people are satisfied with the media.⁶ Pandey and Mamun (2020) analyzed some misinformation and rumours amid Covid-19 of social media in Bangladesh. They explored that some of the decisions of the government were wrongly interpreted on social media. Some websites started spreading rumours that around 20 lakh people will die from coronavirus in Bangladesh and so on. In this situation government officials not to talk to media to tackle misinformation although it is detrimental to free flow of information.⁷

Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) explored that the kind of benefits the

journalists got from the office during the pandemic. This report based on information obtained from 124 representatives of 20 media outlets in six districts in Bangladesh and found that 71% of field journalists said they did not receive any assistance from the office during the COVID-19.⁸

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) conducted a survey and found that job losses and job pressures had led to deterioration in the working environment for journalists around the world due to COVID-19, with three out of four journalists facing restrictions, barriers or threats.⁹ Reza (2020) examined pre and post-Covid-19 realities of Bangladesh media. He found out that the workload and health hazards put the lives of journalists and media workers at risk. Few media organizations have cut salaries, sent journalists on compulsory leave.¹⁰ SACMID (South Asian Centre for Media In Development) conducted a study of 200 media workers in Bangladesh. In the study, 45% of journalists said they were not doing enough investigative journalism at the time. 37% of journalists think that the media is failing to provide accurate information, which is one of the many reasons for the spread of rumors.³

Haque (2020) discussed a statistical analysis of the dead journalist during COVID-19 in Bangladesh, the type of workplace identified by the journalists, and a review of the strategies and actions to be taken to protect journalists. Data was collected using primary and secondary sources.¹¹ International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) examined the current situation of female journalist. This organization surveyed 558 female journalists from 52 countries and found that two-thirds of women are suffering greater stress than male counterparts; about 59% said the pandemic has affected their health, the main problem being with sleep due to COVID-19.¹² Reviewing the above literature shows that in the international and national perspective, some research has been conducted on the current situation of journalists and the role of media to disseminate information to the people. However, there has been no specific study on the impact of COVID-19 on journalists and the journalism industry in Bangladesh, since the present study seeks to uncover that issue using qualitative research through secondary data.

Methodology

The research has been accomplished on the basis of qualitative research through secondary sources. Analysis of data from secondary sources is becoming an important method in mass communication research. Consistent with the purpose of the present article, article's format has been constructed by analyzing the information obtained from various secondary sources such as books, journals, magazines, newspaper reports, and websites. From the information obtained, a clear idea about journalism's current situation in Bangladesh has come out.

The impact of COVID-19 on Journalism in Bangladesh**Newspapers at Risk during COVID-19**

In Bangladesh, all but five or six newspapers were at risk before COVID-19 due to increased online readership and decrease in advertisements. However, due to the pandemic, private advertisements in newspapers have reduced to great extents. The sales of newspapers have decreased about two-thirds. As a result, newspaper owners cannot pay the salaries and allowances of the journalists.¹³ Many local newspapers have closed down, and national newspapers have reduced the number of pages. As of July, 2020, 86 newspapers are being published in eight divisional cities of the country including Dhaka. According to the government's Film and Publication Department (DFP), before COVID-19, these eight divisions are supposed to publish 340 newspapers, meaning 254 newspapers have closed down. Out of the 54 that are currently active, three are based in Chittagong, two in Sylhet, eleven in Mymensingh, four in Rangpur, four in Khulna, six in Rajshahi and 22 in Barisal. Of these 54, at least 20 are written on a small scale, with either fewer pages or irregularly.¹⁴ According to NOAB (Newspaper Owners Association of Bangladesh), the COVID-19 situation has brought the industry to the brink and without government support, the industry will face more crisis. The industry requires government support in loans and incentives on easy terms to protect the newspaper industry.¹⁵

Local Newspaper and Journalists in Crisis

During this time, local journalists have to keep abreast of the details of who was infected with the virus in their city, who died of the symptoms and whether the deceased was buried in accordance

with the rules of hygiene. In addition, their stress has increased in providing information on everyday events, politics, economy, and society's different issues contrary to the number of opportunities. Before the pandemic began, most of the local journalists received very little financial benefit from the media organizations in contrast to the level of effort and risk they had to endure. The public-private advertising commission was one of the main sources of income for most local journalists. But amid such a time of crisis, the advertising market has shrunk and the honor of participating in various ceremonies, meetings and seminars has almost come to a halt. Moreover, many national level media organizations have also cut down or completely stopped providing salaries of district and upazila journalists on the pretext of COVID-19.¹⁶ Thus, the health crisis has reached its peak as the perpetual economic crisis of local journalists has intensified at this time. Many local journalists are unable to afford the use safety equipment (PPE, masks, gloves) on a daily basis to deal with the risks of the virus.

As a result, a significant number of local journalists in Bangladesh have already contracted the virus. Additionally, local journalists are neglected in both receipt and recognition. In the case of news gathering, no solutions or assistance were provided for the journalist's travel needs and even though they worked at the risk of their lives, no separate incentive was given by the government for local journalists.¹⁷

Like the local journalists, the local newspapers published from the districts and upazilas are also going through extreme crisis. During this pandemic, the number of advertisements in almost all newspapers has decreased at an unusual rate. According to a survey by the Bangladesh Independent Journalists Network (BIJN), 285 (80.31%) of the 457 local newspapers published in 34 districts of the country, including upazilas, districts and divisional cities, have been completely shut down.³

Journalist Tortured and Killed During Pandemic Period

Work of journalists comes with a lot of risks. The situation however is though serious worldwide. According to the Geneva-based NGO Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), 127 journalists died of coronavirus from at least 31 countries between March 01 and

May 31. The highest death toll in Latin America was 72, eight died in Pakistan, five in the United Kingdom, four in Bangladesh and three in France, India and Italy.¹⁸ Recently PEC released that 500 journalists had died of COVID-19 in 57 countries around the world till November. More than half of the journalists passed away COVID-19 are from Latin American countries. Their number is 251. PEC Secretary-General Blaise Lampen said that the actual number of journalists passed away COVID-19 could be much higher than 500.¹⁹

While the situation is dire in nearly every country, the situation in Bangladesh is more complicated.

Unlike many other countries their professional organizations and recruiting authorities do not take account of their safety in Bangladesh. Many even do not have any official information on the number of deaths or injuries suffered during the work. There is no visible initiative from their end even. According to a Facebook group survey (Our Media-Our Rights), a total of 833 journalists in Bangladesh have been affected by COVID-19 till June 9, of whom, 12 have died. In addition, 9 more journalists have died with symptoms of the virus and only 216 have recovered till date.²⁰ As of November 15, 35 journalists passed away in Bangladesh.¹⁹

Table 1: Number of journalists identified during Covid-19

Types of media	The number and percentage (%) of COVID-19 identified journalists till June (In Dhaka)	The number and percentage (%) of COVID-19 identified journalists till June (outside Dhaka)	Total number	Percentage (%)
Newspaper	215	169	384	46.1%
Radio	07	01	08	0.96%
Television	283	81	364	43.7%
Online	48	29	77	9.28%
Total	553 (66.39%)	280 (33.61%)	833	100%

Among the total corona-identified journalists, 66.39% (553 people) were identified in Dhaka while the rest 33.61% (280 people) were identified to be outside Dhaka. Newspaper (daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly) and television journalists account for nearly the same proportion of overall corona-identified journalists, at 46.1% (384) and 43.7% (364), respectively. Ahmed Fayez, Chief Coordinator of the 'Our Media-Our Rights' Facebook group, said that 0.96% (8 people) of radio and 9.28% (77 people) of online media were among the journalists identified as Corona, according to his observations. The number of journalists in Bangladesh is more than this. He believes that a lot of information is largely unavailable due to lack of transparency and accountability in the system.¹¹

At the same time, torture, lawsuits and attacks on journalists have increased. According to the Law and Arbitration Center, the tortures of journalists have almost doubled during pandemic. In the last six months, 156 journalists have been subjected to

torture, harassment, intimidation and obstruction doing their professional work. 106 Journalists were tortured and harassed in between April-June compared to 50 journalists in between January to March. 20% of journalists have faced public and private threats for reporting about corona. In addition, several journalists in the country are still incarcerated in the case of the Digital Security Act.¹³

The Current Situation of Women Journalists

At present there are no statistics on the total number of women journalists in Bangladesh. But according to the Global Media Monitoring Project 2015, 86% of Bangladeshi journalists are male and 16% are female. Of these, 8% worked in newspapers, 33% in radio and 19% in television.² Women in general in Bangladesh has to go through many obstacles such as gender inequality, barriers to promotion, unfavorable working environment, sexual harassment. Laili Begum, a journalist and editor of the online portal Jaleshwari.com, despite being attacked and threatened more than once for

professional reasons, did not get support from the concerned media organization. Instead, she was fired from her job. Laili said that 'Being a woman, means you are subject to more harassment. I went abroad with permission from my office for treatment after being the victim of an accident. I was fired while I was there'.²¹ The condition of women in journalism is more deplorable during COVID-19. The pandemic have added new problems to the already unfavorable situation.

Although women journalists work on an equal footing with men at risk in the COVID-19 situation, the implementation of the media is beginning with the dismissal of women journalists. In this case, women journalists are being fired without prior notice leading them to fall into an identity crisis. Even the incidents of violation, harassment, oppression and discrimination of women journalists are being suppressed in the current wave of dismissals of journalists during COVID-19. Maria Salam has long been in charge of the English online edition of a national daily. On Corona's pretext, the media authorities shut down the English online version and unjustly sent Maria on unpaid leave.²¹ Such incidents have taken place in several media houses. To overcome the situation, women journalists are initially proposing to establish their own organized and alternative media. Additionally, there is a need for journalist organizations and the government to play an important role in protecting the rights of women journalists.

Irregular Salaries and Layoffs of Media Workers

Coronavirus has disrupted normal life, business and economic activities. This has negatively affected the media sector, such as declining newspaper sales, and delay in the payments of advertisement by government and non-government organizations to the media outlets. All in all, the situation has become very difficult for Bangladeshi journalists.²² As a result, many media workers have lost their jobs, many of whom may not have been paid their outstanding salaries.²³ According to SACMID (South Asian Centre for Media In Development), 30.5% of journalists did not receive their salaries on time during COVID-19, 26.5% are afraid of losing their jobs and 35.5% are emotionally broken for fear of being infected with the virus. During the last Eid-ul-Fitr, the Dhaka Reporters Unity, an organization of journalists in Bangladesh, listed 275 terminated,

unemployed and unpaid reporters. At present this number has exceeded 350.¹⁴

Some media organizations have cut salaries, sent journalists on compulsory leave and have even planned to lay off large numbers of journalists. For example, Prothom Alo, Daily Star, Ittefaq and some of the top media organizations are cutting the media workers on various excuses including reduced circulation, lack of advertisements and losses.²⁴ In such a situation, teachers, media workers and civil society activists of different universities have issued human chains, protest letters and statements at different times to stop the cuts, but such salary cutoffs of media personnel have not stopped yet.²⁵

Restrictions of the Flow of Independent Journalism and Objective Information

In this critical moment of the pandemic, the governments of various countries in South Asia have become more authoritarian. New laws and regulations are being issued in the countries to stop any criticism of the government. As a result, the field of independent journalism is shrinking throughout the region.²⁶ A study published by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) found that job losses and job pressures had led to deterioration in the working environment for journalists around the world, with three out of four journalists facing restrictions, barriers or threats.⁹ This flow also exists in Bangladesh. SACMID conducted a study of 200 media workers in Bangladesh in May. In the study, 45% of journalists said they were not doing enough investigative journalism at the time. 37% of journalists think that the media is failing to provide accurate information, which is one of the many reasons for the spread of rumors. 84% said that information is not reaching everyone properly, regardless of rural-urban, rich-poor, 6% think that people are getting wrong information due to social media and 41.5% said, rumors are circulating due to insufficient access to accurate information to the public.³

Moreover, in the annual index of the Paris-based non-profit organization, Reporters Without Borders, Bangladesh's position on media freedom has deteriorated. Bangladesh ranks 151 out of 180 countries in the index. In 2019, the position was 150th. At the same time, threats by political activists on journalists at field level, the shutdown

of news websites and the arrest of journalists have increased.²⁷ As a result, journalists are not able to collect news properly. In addition, a committee was formed to monitor the media in the COVID-19 situation, but in the end it was canceled due to criticism.⁹ Experts' claim that during COVID-19, press freedom and the space of independent speech has continued to become narrower and weaker, which is a great loss for the whole democratic system and structure.³

Tv and Radio Journalism during Pandemic Situation

In the last two decades, 30 TV channels have been broadcasting in Bangladesh. 15 more new TV channels are waiting to be aired. There are 26 private radios in the country. Almost every district has community radio. One of the sources of income of these media is government-private-local advertisement which has shrunk due to the pandemic situation. As a result, the TV and radio channels of Bangladesh are struggling to survive in the financial crisis.²⁸ Bangladeshi TV journalists are not included in the Wage Board. As a result, there is no minimum security in this profession. However, due to the decrease in newspaper circulation due to lockdowns, curfews or traffic restrictions, the number of TV viewers has increased and Listeners have turned to radio again.⁹

However, TV journalism has become more important and dangerous than ever to meet the needs of the readers-viewers-listeners. There is no alternative to quality pictures when it comes to quality news. In this case, many media workers have been attacked while going out to take pictures and collecting news from public gatherings. While reporting such cases, social distancing is hardly maintained. Moreover, cameras attract crowds which obliterates the case of social distancing, throwing the journalist at risk of exposure to the virus and making their work more challenging.⁴

The Initiatives Of Government for the Journalist during Pandemic Crisis

According to the Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), 71% of field journalists said they did not receive any assistance from the office during the COVID-19 period. Among the safety equipment, 16.72% got masks, 16.87% got hand sanitizers and 11.34% got PPE. This

report based on information obtained from 124 representatives of 20 media outlets in six districts.⁸ On the other hand, at the direction of the Prime Minister, the government will provide assistance to one and a half thousand journalists under the Journalist Welfare Trust till July.²⁹ Of these, 200 from Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Naogaon and Natore, 338 from Khulna and from different districts journalists were given checks of Tk 10,000.³⁰ The government has decided to give Tk 50 thousand to 3 lakh to each family of journalists through the Journalist Welfare Trust who died of COVID-19 and the symptoms. This assistance has already been provided to 6 families.³¹ About 500 reporters have received government rations organized by Reporters Unity.¹⁴

Besides, many steps have been taken by the government to ensure proper payment of salaries and allowances to journalists. For example, arrangements have been made to pay arrears of about Tk 80 crore to media owners from various government institution.³² Bangladesh Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said that journalists in India, Pakistan, Nepal or Sri Lanka have not been given such assistance during the COVID-19 period as has been given to them during the corona period by the Journalist Welfare Trust on the instructions of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Assistance has been provided only in case of death. Through the Journalist Welfare Trust, we have provided one-time assistance to those journalists who have not been paid for a long time. That still continues.³³ Recently, the government has also taken initiative to monitor propaganda or rumors' in journalism.³⁴

The Performance of Media In Bangladesh during Covid-19

The media in Bangladesh has played a very necessary and effective role during this crisis. The media has consistently presented a variety of data, such as infections, recovery and death to the government and the citizens. As a result, the people have been informed about the nature and extent of the pandemic situation and the policy makers have also received a direction. The media has created an awareness about COVID-19 among the people of Bangladesh by promoting and presenting comparative discussions about COVID-19 in different countries. Besides, the media has exposed the various problems of civic life and confronted the

official media who provide solutions or services. The media has also put it extra efforts to present COVID-19 or public health expert opinions on talk shows or discussions. Additionally, the media has been working closely with the government to deal with the COVID-19 disaster in Bangladesh.

At the same time, while during other disasters, media personnel have gone out of their way to fulfill their professional responsibilities. But during the COVID-19 period, non-field level journalists had to do complete their responsibilities from their homes. In such a situation, the preparations required to give the workers the opportunity to work from home were not taken by many except a few organizations. As a result, it was very challenging for the journalists to avoid the risk. The role of media has also been lauded by Information Minister Hasan Mahmud, praising the media for their work and efficiency despite all barriers.³⁴

Conclusion and Recommendation

Like the rest of the world, Bangladesh's journalism industry is in deep crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But such times make the work of journalists more important than ever. There is no substitute for hygiene to protect journalists from the virus and hence, newspaper companies and government agencies should arrange training for the protection of journalists and provide security equipment free of cost. Through the Journalist Welfare Trust, financial assistance to journalists during the COVID-19 period should be further increased. The Government of Bangladesh has announced incentives for various sectors, including the industrial sector, to address the current difficult economic realities. The newspaper industry should also ensure that it gets that incentive. The owners of media outlets to seek loan assistance from the government on the easiest terms or bring emergency assistance funds to media outlets from their other businesses. Owners of media organizations may also set up a joint fund to overcome the crisis. Additionally, journalists need to be provided with psycho-social counseling. Journalists should avoid

reporting in public as much as possible and need to be careful and follow all possible safety guidelines. The history of social change is a testament to how strong the role of journalism is in building bridges between the government and the people, paving the way for transparency and accountability in the democratic process and establishing the rights and good governance of disadvantaged people. So the crisis of the journalism industry of any country means the crisis of that country. In general, journalists, the government, the journalist community and the media organizations have to work together to deal the effects of COVID-19.

Implications of the Study

The study can be used for educational purposes, to evaluate the problems of the journalism industry and journalists in Bangladesh during COVID-19 Pandemic. Besides that there have been few recommendations to protect journalists and journalism industry against the corona effects. So this study can also be useful from a policy perspective to eliminate or reduce journalists' problems in all media sectors in Bangladesh.

Limitations of the Study

Secondary data has been used in the study, where journals, magazines, newspaper reports, website and another researcher's findings have been highlighted. As a result, there is less opportunity to check the reliability and validity of the data. But we have actually done this research with the data published in the recognized media of Bangladesh.

Acknowledgement

Researchers would like to thank all the journalists who have worked tirelessly to provide information to Bangladeshi citizens during COVID-19.

Funding

There is no funding to be disclosed.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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