

Rebuilding Trust in Bangladesh's Media: A Way Forward

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Source: The Daily Star

Introduction

In any democratic society, the media holds significant importance as it not only informs but also shapes public discourse, gathers support for critical issues, and serves as a primary source of knowledge and information for citizens. Media acts as a powerful force in the political landscape by providing accurate information on policy decisions and actions taken by the government and

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other political entities. This critical function enables the media to hold those in power accountable, often positioning it as a vital tool against corruption, misconduct, and abuse of authority. By shedding light on hidden issues, scrutinising public policies, and giving a platform for diverse voices, the media contributes to a culture of transparency and accountability essential for a functioning democracy.²

However, the media's role in educating the masses and fostering meaningful public discussions can be compromised when transparency is lacking within the media institutions themselves. Issues such as political ownership, covert influences, lack of journalistic freedom, and opaque ownership structures hinder the media's ability to serve as an impartial watchdog. These factors dilute its effectiveness in holding the powerful accountable and, at times, lead to biased reporting that reflects the interests of a select few rather than the public. The very role of the media as a guardian of democratic values is threatened when these challenges go unaddressed, as they limit the media's independence and reduce public trust. Therefore, for the media to fulfil its role as a democratic pillar, it must adhere to principles of transparency and integrity. A free, independent, and transparent media is not only crucial for an informed citizenry but also serves as a check on power, helping to protect the democratic processes that ensure a government remains accountable to its people.³

Existing landscape of the Press

Political Ownership and Influence:

In one of the research studies that has actually investigated the actual state of journalists and media, the Centre for Governance Studies found that a vast majority of media organisations were more or less politically involved, along with the fact that the owners of these media corporations also acted as editors themselves hampering the impartiality of the information coming out of these institutions.⁴ This indicates a pervasive nexus between politics and media ownership which often

² CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE, “The Role of Media in Democracy: A Strategic Approach Technical Publication Series Center for Democracy and Governance Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support, and Research,” 1999, <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2496/200sbc.pdf>.

³ Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, “Who Owns the Media in Bangladesh ?” (Center for Governance Studies, January 2021), https://www.academia.edu/49047302/Who_Owns_the_Media_in_Bangladesh.

⁴ Ibid

leads to biased reporting that aligns with the interests of the ruling party or influential political figures.

An Absence of Press Freedom:

The 2018 Digital Security Act has instilled fear among journalists, particularly those engaged in investigative reporting. Broad and vague definitions within the law allow authorities to prosecute individuals for "spreading confusion" or "tarnishing the image of the nation," leading to self-censorship as journalists avoid sensitive topics that could provoke legal repercussions from the government and law enforcement agencies.⁵ In early 2023 alone, at least 56 journalists were targeted by government actions, including harassment and arrests under the Act which allows for broad interpretations that can lead to severe penalties for those who dissent or criticise the government.⁶ The Act has paved the way for legalised harassment at the hands of law enforcement authorities resulting in self-censorship and lack of journalistic efforts to cover political issues deeming them too sensitive or risky.

Lack of Public Trust:

The trust towards media from the general public is also very low through various socioeconomic classes. A study has found that Bangladeshi youths have very little trust towards the media as it cited the youth tend to have alternative sources for media consumption which is why they tend to distrust the conventional media due to its perceived biases and perceived politicised reporting.⁷ Zillur Rahman states that the general public is losing faith in the traditional media as these corporations has more or less started to peddle government narratives often utilising

⁵ Md. Aliur Rahman and Harun-Or Rashid, "Digital Security Act and Investigative Journalism in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis," *CenRaPS Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (July 15, 2020): 216–36, <https://doi.org/10.46291/cenraps.v2i2.32>.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: End Crackdown against Journalists and Critics," Human Rights Watch, May 3, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/bangladesh-end-crackdown-against-journalists-and-critics>.

⁷ Maliha Tabassum and Mohammad Aminul Islam, "Factors Affecting Trust in News Media among Young People in Bangladesh Factors Affecting Trust in News Media among Young People in Bangladesh," *World of Media Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, no. 1 (April 30, 2024): 41–68, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380183761_Factors_affecting_trust_in_news_media_among_young_people_in_Bangladesh_Factors_affecting_trust_in_news_media_among_young_people_in_Bangladesh.

disinformation, and misleading narratives, that only end up cementing their perceived identity as a government propaganda outlet among the public.⁸

Lack of Journalistic Ethics:

Historically speaking journalistic practices could be maintained due to the static nature of media at that time which was less in number but had high impact on the public mindset which resulted in stringent standards to ensure proper information was delivered to the masses.⁹ But this has changed with the rise of capitalism and technology as the media landscape is now saturated with multiple media outlets at multiple levels of the news environment.¹⁰ Because of which diverse journalistic practices have arisen with no standard of uniformity across the industry. This can also be caused due to audience segmentation in terms of age, gender, social class and the mode through which the people consume news.¹¹ The inclusion of sensationalist news to bolster viewer count on the internet has resulted in media publishing news from unofficial and non-trustworthy sources.

Ways Forward to Rebuild Trust

Advocating for a more Independent Media:

Media organisations should be given proper freedom to carry out their journalistic practices. Laws such as the DSA must be repealed to ensure that journalists need not to fear persecution due to their reporting. Political meddling within the ownership structure must be avoided and any the cases where ownership of political actors within any news organisations do occur, it must be made public so that the public are aware of the bias that may come out of their reporting. Regulations must not only be enacted but also implemented as an instrument to ensure protection of journalists from harassment, whether it is from private or government entities. Laws should exist that ensure that journalists don't misuse their power to spread disinformation about the government that would create a security risk but such laws should have clear, concise, and unambiguous language rather than vague wording like that of DSA. The general populace must also play a role in ensuring that

⁸ Zillur Rahman, "Misinformation and Disinformation: A Threat to Democracy in Bangladesh," The Daily Star, February 9, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/misinformation-and-disinformation-threat-democracy-bangladesh-3540106>.

⁹ SILVIO WAISBORD, "In Journalism We Trust? Credibility and Fragmented Journalism in Latin America," in *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies*, ed. Katrin Voltmer (Routledge, 2006), 64–77.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

the media remains free from influence as their relationship with the press is symbiotic. The people greatly depend on these organisations to know about their government's actions and policies and any regulation that may hamper this ability.¹²

Inquiries into Media Ownership Structures:

Alison Harcourt, Associate Professor at the University of Exeter has stated that it is important for any media institution to disclose their ownership structure, since the ownership of the institution moulds how they present certain news, it is absolutely imperative that the people know the biases of the news which they are receiving.¹³ This promotes a sense of accountability and public oversight of the media sector which promotes public participation in the democratic processes of a country. Media ownership greatly affects the information that is released by any news organisation as they are rarely if ever critical of an institution that has a significant share of the ownership. Political actors or entities at times buy, own or create media houses and press organisations to further their goals, and without such knowledge being publicly available, the general people are prone to be misled by factually incorrect reports or disinformation.

Stable Journalistic Practices:

In today's fragmented media landscape, journalism can build trust through several approaches such as professional expertise or ideological alignment. Journalists can develop public trust on technical skill and objectivity, by establishing themselves as experts who present facts impartially, rooted in scientific principles to foster informed public debate. Trust in this case can depend on professional norms, as audiences expect unbiased, accurate reporting. Again, trust building can also be achieved by aligning with audiences on shared values, forming emotional bonds rather than prioritising technical rigour. This approach, stemming from partisan media traditions, appeals to audiences who seek ideological resonance with journalists, valuing loyalty over neutrality.¹⁴

¹² USAID Bangladesh Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Activity, "FINAL REPORT Assessment of the Media Sector in Bangladesh," *USAID*, March 24, 2022, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z9T6.pdf.

¹³ Alison Harcourt, "Alison Harcourt, Associate Professor at University of Exeter," *Access Info Europe*, January 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cClwZxOGY0M>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

Fact-checking Initiatives:

Journalism in Bangladesh faces a dual challenge in ensuring sustainability and combating the spread of rumours, both of which require a commitment to transparency, public trust, and accountability. Public confidence in media has waned due to inadequate governance within news organisations, compounded by the prioritisation of political loyalty over public interest. The Bangladesh Press Council’s 1993 Code of Conduct has seen minimal implementation, with few media outlets displaying editorial guidelines or financial transparency. To restore public trust, sustainable journalism must become mainstream, integrating principles like accuracy and fairness with actionable reforms. Efforts such as establishing editorial standards, appointing ombudspersons, and disclosing financial records would mark essential steps toward an accountable, democratic media.¹⁵



Source: The Daily Star

In parallel, addressing the rampant spread of misinformation demands immediate, mid-term, and long-term responses. Short-term strategies should focus on restoring trustworthy communication channels by collaborating with fact-checking organisations and community leaders, while the

¹⁵ Sheikh Sabiha Alam, “The Regime Changed in Bangladesh. Can the Media Change Too?,” Columbia Journalism Review, October 18, 2024, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/the-regime-changed-in-bangladesh-can-the-media-change-too.php>.

media should disseminate verified information to counter false narratives. The media sector would benefit from urging social media companies to establish local offices and improve identity verification measures, supporting swift action against misinformation.¹⁶ Moreover, digital literacy initiatives can empower the public to critically assess information. Solutions should further include setting up a dedicated rumour-monitoring unit, integrating digital literacy in educational curricula, and enhancing cybersecurity.¹⁷

Digital Literacy Campaigns:

Implementing digital literacy campaigns in Bangladesh requires a proper approach to address critical issues around misinformation, journalistic integrity, and digital navigation. Given the challenges of low journalistic integrity and high misinformation rates, a needs assessment can identify specific knowledge gaps in vulnerable groups, such as marginalised communities, youth, and women. A curriculum tailored to these needs should cover essential topics like fact-checking, online safety, and responsible media consumption, designed in collaboration with educators and media experts to cultivate informed digital habits.¹⁸ There is also a need for training as these sessions emphasise hands-on learning and critical thinking. These can be conducted in accessible community spaces or online, to enable participants to practically apply their skills. Community engagement, through local media partnerships and awareness campaigns, can further the reach and impact of these programs. Providing ongoing support like mentorship, user-friendly resources, and access to reliable online information sources reinforces learning and helps participants stay informed. Regular assessments and certificates upon completion add credibility and encourage skill development, while sustainability efforts—such as training local trainers and securing continuous funding—ensure the program’s longevity. With continuous feedback to adapt and improve, these campaigns empower individuals to critically engage with information, fostering

¹⁶ Asaduzzaman Kajol, “Strategic Approaches to Mitigate Rumours in Bangladesh,” *The Daily Star*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/strategic-approaches-mitigate-rumours-bangladesh-3672991>.

¹⁷ SM Rezwan Ul Alam, “How Can Bangladesh Have Sustainable Journalism and Media Self-Regulation?,” *The Daily Star*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/how-can-we-introduce-sustainable-journalism-and-media-self-regulation-3135741>.

¹⁸ Helen Gebregiorgis, “A Campaign to Enhance Youth’s Digital Literacy in Ethiopia,” UnCDF.org, 2019, <https://www.uncdf.org/article/8781/a-campaign-to-enhance-youths-digital-literacy-in-ethiopia>.

resilience against misinformation and encouraging responsible digital citizenship across Bangladesh.¹⁹

Conclusion

The last several years under the Awami League government have undeniably been challenging for the press in Bangladesh. Draconian laws, particularly the Digital Security Act, were introduced with the intent to silence criticism and dissent, leading to the arrest and state-sponsored harassment of journalists who dared to speak out. Such restrictive measures have fostered an environment of fear and self-censorship, where journalists often avoid reporting on sensitive topics to protect their own safety. Additionally, the growing involvement of political actors within the media sector has fuelled a rise in politicised and disinformation reporting, designed to manipulate public perception. The erosion of journalistic ethics, with news organisations increasingly prioritising sensationalism over factual accuracy, has significantly damaged public trust. Revenue generation has, for many, overshadowed journalistic integrity, resulting in a media landscape where sensationalised content often takes precedence over truth.

In such a situation, Bangladesh's media sector needs deep and wide-ranging reforms to help it become a positive force that supports democratic changes in the country. A truly free media is essential because it gives journalists and news outlets the space to keep an eye on government actions and hold them accountable for the good of the people. News organisations and other media companies should be required to make their ownership structures public, allowing readers to understand any potential biases in their reporting. Such transparency will help people see the influences that may shape the news they consume. Additionally, upholding journalistic integrity should be the top priority for every news organisation, especially since the public depends heavily on their work. Regulations should be set to discourage sensationalism and false information, both of which often harm the quality of reporting. Setting up strong fact-checking processes within newsrooms and promoting digital literacy across the public can further counter any outlets that do not meet the standards expected of the press. These efforts would not only help rebuild trust in the media but also enable people to spot and challenge unreliable information, leading to a more informed public.

¹⁹ Romina Bandura and Elena I. Méndez Leal, "The Digital Literacy Imperative" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 18, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/digital-literacy-imperative>.