

Journalism in Onset of COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh: Governance and Coping Strategies of Newspaper Journalists

Rakib Ahmed*
Uzzwal Kumar Mondal**
Mridha Md. Shiblee Noman***

Abstract

This paper is about newspaper journalism practices under the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. Based on two separate theories -- Communication Competence Theory, and Risk and Crisis Communication Management Theory, this study intends to understand the challenges that newspaper journalists faced while discharging their professional responsibilities and governing the newsroom operations during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. In addition, this paper explores the strategies that journalists followed to adapt to the changed working environments and engage themselves in the processes of news production and publication. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 12 journalists including three news managers from three national dailies -- daily Prothom Alo, daily Samakal, and The Daily Star. Standing on findings, the discussion progressed around six areas – governance of newsroom operations, preparations, communication, newsgathering, restrictions, insecurity and protection. The key findings are: i) the COVID-19 crisis appeared as a blow before the newspaper journalists of Bangladesh due to a policy-level shortcoming in terms of formulating plans beforehand to govern the newsroom operations in the face of the challenges that emerged along with the pandemic; ii) the journalists were not comfortable in adapting themselves to the working from home strategy as they struggled in gathering and verifying information, and doing required communications using the virtual communication methods while working from distance; and iii) the journalists experienced psychological pressures

* Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342, Bangladesh. E-mail: rakibahmed@juniv.edu

** Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342, Bangladesh. E-mail: umondal@juniv.edu

*** Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342, Bangladesh. E-mail: shibleenoman@juniv.edu

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because of multiple factors that included -- limited access to protective gear and fear of infection; protection of family members; adapting themselves to the changed working environments; and tension of losing the job in the pandemic crisis.

Key-words: COVID-19 in Bangladesh, challenges in journalism, governance in newsroom operation, coping strategies, newspaper journalism.

Introduction

Despite the serious impact of COVID-19 on the global news and media industry (Guðmundsson, 2020; Singh & Shaheen, 2020), the journalists around the world continued their work under the pandemic and subsequently became casualties of it following their exposures to the novel corona virus. At least 1,580 journalists died of COVID-19 in 78 countries around the world, and some 54 journalists lost their lives in COVID-19 in Bangladesh as of June 2021 (Press Emblem Campaign, 2021). The journalists worked in a complex reality as they simultaneously needed to be cautious about their personal protection and continue their work to update people about the crises in the pandemic (Leask et al. cited in Shah et al., 2020). Tim Currie, director of the King's School of Journalism, said journalists practised social distancing at the same time worked with doctors, nurses, and law enforcers under the pandemic (Delory, 2020). On the other hand, people were eager to know authentic information about COVID-19 and the changes happening in their societal set-ups (Muno cited in Parvin et al., 2020). According to Guðmundsson (2020), journalism faced two major challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. One was the survival of news firms based on the traditional business model, and the second was continuing journalistic work from a distance (Guðmundsson, 2020). Besides, the press experienced additional pressures as journalists had to embrace new technologies with minimum or no training and conduct interviews online (Hoak, 2021).

Like elsewhere, the news industry in Bangladesh began bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic as the crisis hit the country in March 2020. While the pandemic brought new challenges before this profession (Ahmed, 2020), the newspaper industry and journalists struggled in manifold forms in the early stages of the disaster in Bangladesh. As Mahfuz Anam, editor of Dhaka-based newspaper The Daily Star said a "deadly and unprecedented" crisis engulfed the newspaper industry as it witnessed a fall in circulation and flow of advertisements to it during COVID-19 pandemic (Jamuna Television, 2020). According to a Prothom Alo news report, 254 out of 340 national dailies -- listed under the department of films and publications -- suspended their operations within four months of the pandemic in Bangladesh (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). The reality was similar for the local newspapers. A Bangladesh Independent Journalists Network (BIJN) survey results have revealed that 275 out of 456 local newspapers were shut down

during the early months of the pandemic, mainly due to financial limitations ("Coronakale Bondho Hoyer", 2020). While only seven Dhaka-based Bangla and four English language newspapers managed to pay salaries to their employees regularly till July 2020, other newspapers failed to do it (Sharifuzzaman, 2020).

In the early phases of the crisis, the newspaper journalists, as Hoak (2021, p. 15) finds, struggled in "finding and reaching" proper sources of news. A Freedom House research has discovered that news operations in 91 countries out of 192 faced restrictions including cancellation of registrations, blocking of websites, and suspension of printing of newspapers under the pandemic (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). The journalists of these countries, as the research has claimed, experienced arrest, torture, violence, and intimidation while covering COVID-19 linked issues (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). Besides, as Gluck (2020) finds, journalists often discovered themselves in stressful conditions during the COVID-19 crisis that forced them to pay emotional or mental tolls. Furthermore, the surge of rumours and mis/-disinformation around COVID-19 across the media and internet platforms made journalists' task of finding and releasing correct information challenging. While the World Health Organization (2020a) thinks people struggled in finding reliable information in the face of an "over-abundance" presence of correct and incorrect information about COVID-19, Krause et al. (2020, p. 2) argue that circulation of falsehoods created a "multi-layered" health risk during the pandemic.

In line with the challenges that journalists encountered globally under the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladeshi journalists worked under a changing environment with various constraints. The results of a South Asia Centre for Media in Development (SACMID) survey, conducted on journalists of Bangladesh, have revealed that 20 percent of respondents faced "threats" coming from the government and non-government ends while covering COVID-19 related topics ("Sasthayabeema Chharai 76", 2020). The media engagement policies of Bangladesh, as Aziz et al. (2020) find, restricted citizens' access to information that created confusion among people about COVID-19. The Human Rights Watch claimed that one physician, several students and opposition activists were arrested for their comments on COVID-19 issues under the Digital Security Act 2018 during the pandemic (Kamruzzaman, 2021). While referring to a study, Ahmed (2020) says journalists were physically assaulted at different parts of Bangladesh for reporting on corruption during COVID-19. In addition, as the SACMID study has discovered, 35 percent of journalists struggled in finding proper sources of information due to the diffusion of falsehoods ("Sasthayabeema Chharai 76", 2020). Moreover, journalists experienced financial hardship. Sharifuzzaman (2020) finds that nearly one thousand journalists plead for the Tk 10,000 (approximately \$118) one-time donation, declared by the government for the journalists who were in distress during the COVID-19 crisis.

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Against these backdrops, this study plans to examine the challenges that Bangladeshi newspaper journalists experienced during the first six months -- March to August 2020 -- of the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides, this paper explores the strategies that journalists followed to adapt themselves to the changed working environments and news production policies. While the existing literatures predominantly discuss the crises and challenges that the news industry and journalists, irrespective of platforms, dealt with under the COVID-19 pandemic at different parts of the globe, this study focuses exclusively on journalistic practices in daily newspapers in Bangladesh, and coping strategies of journalists in pandemic realities -- two understudied aspects, at least in the contexts of the pandemic in Bangladesh. To achieve the goals, this study looks for answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the challenges the newspaper journalists faced in their professional and individual levels at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh?

RQ2: What are the strategies the newspaper journalists followed in discharging their professional roles in pandemic situations?

RQ3: How did the news managers respond to the crisis in terms of running newsroom operations under the pandemic?

Literature Review

Challenges, Safety Concerns, and Dwelling with Falsehoods

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as Ahmed (2020) finds, the Bangladeshi journalists mainly faced two challenges. Firstly, they struggled in collecting and presenting accurate information amid restrictions, and secondly, they were worried about their safety as most of the media houses failed to downsize the infection rate of their employees (Ahmed, 2020). In addition, journalists faced restrictions while working under the pandemic. In April 2020, the Reporters without Borders (RSF) expressed concern over a rise of "civilian and police violence and judicial harassment" against the journalists covering COVID-19 (Covid-19 Triggers Surge in Violence, 2020). The private television owners' association, following an information ministry directive in April 2020, asked journalists not to do "negative" discussions in talk shows in COVID-19 situations (Ahmed, 2020). A newspaper commentary states some journalists in Bangladesh were physically injured between April and May 2020 for publishing news on the government's relief distribution operations and many journalists lost their jobs (Alam, 2020). The local journalists, according to the acting editor of a local daily Chandpur Probaha, struggled in gathering news on COVID-19 due to several reasons that included unwillingness of physicians and officials to give face-to-face or over the phone interviews; lack of transportation (public transports remained suspended in shutdown periods); and inability in affording required safety gears (Badsha, 2020).

In an interview with Deutsche Welle (DW), international media policy expert Christian Mihr says "authoritarian" governments around the world sent professional journalists, citizen journalists, and bloggers to jail for their critical comments against the rulers (Höhn, 2020). According to Reporters Without Borders, 47 percent of the United Nations member states including the USA, Russia, China, and India violated press freedom during COVID-19 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). In March 2020, Bangladesh's ministry of information constituted a cell comprising bureaucrats to monitor whether rumours or misinformation about COVID-19 connected affairs are released on mainstream and social media (Monitoring Media, 2020).

On the other hand, journalists were concerned about the personal safety and protection of their family members. As the results of a SACMID survey, conducted on 200 Bangladeshi journalists in May 2020, have revealed that 32 percent of respondents did not have access to Personal Protective Equipment, and 76 percent of journalists did not receive health insurance support or medical allowance from their organisations during the COVID-19 crisis ("Sasthayabeema Chharai 76", 2020).

Besides, the job of cross-checking information, as Ram (2020) states, appeared as a big challenge before journalists due to the flow of health-related mis-/disinformation during the COVID-19 crisis (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020). The World Health Organization (2020b) believes that an "infodemic" developed in the world following the outbreak of COVID-19.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), journalism played a crucial role in fighting "falsehoods" that disseminated worldwide as quickly as the COVID-19 virus. A study has found that people preferred news media over social media for getting information about COVID-19 crisis (Nielsen et al. cited in Parvin et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis deepened in Bangladesh, at least according to Aziz et al. (2020, p. 145), due to several reasons that included a shortage in the flow of systematic health information, digital divide, fear, and social stigma. The diffusion of rumours and falsehoods, as Nahid (2021) finds, directly affected 21 out of 64 districts of Bangladesh. Al-Zaman (2021) identifies some areas -- health, political, religious, crime and entertainment -- around which the COVID-19 related falsehoods developed and spread in Bangladesh.

Mental Pressure and Financial Constraint

The journalists around the world, who covered topics associated with COVID-19, went through psychological pressures. The results of a survey, conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, and the University of Toronto on journalists working for international organisations, has noticed the presence of "anxiety and depression" among journalists who did reporting on COVID-19 (Selva & Feinstein, 2020). Another survey (cited in Posetti et al., 2020) stated that 70 per cent of journalists considered the "psychological and emotional impacts" of handling COVID-19 issues as

the hardest part of their work during the pandemic. The journalists in the Philippines faced "threats to their physical and mental well-being" during the ongoing pandemic (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020, p. 1). While the psychological state of most of the Nepali journalists was affected by COVID-19, 74 percent of respondents faced financial difficulties during the pandemic (Sreedharan et al., 2020). The female and young US journalists who covered topics linked to the pandemic, as Hoak (2021) finds, experienced more mental pressure than the journalists who received greater support from their offices. Many Indian print media, according to Jadhav (2020), cut employees' salaries and terminated employees to reduce the cost of the organisations. Next to a drop in the flow of advertisements, the Indian newspaper industry witnessed a fall in circulation as many readers stopped purchasing printed newspapers fearing dissemination of virus through papers (Jadhav, 2020). The journalists of Pakistan also experienced physical, psychological and financial challenges during the pandemic (Shah et al., 2020).

Changed Working Environment and Coping Strategies

The journalists worldwide changed their usual routines and styles of work during the COVID-19 crisis, especially in lockdown periods, to cope up with the changing environments. According to Nelson and Simmons (2003), coping is a transactional process where an individual tries to act specifically to overcome an external or internal threatening condition (cited in Monteiro & Pinto, 2017). People in extreme conditions, as Buchanan & Keats (2011) think, try to cope up differently with situations based on personal experiences and contexts. Though debates exist over the coping techniques of journalists due to a shortage of available knowledge on the topic (Monteiro & Pinto, 2017), some scholars argue that journalists pursue different coping strategies in situations of trauma and stress (Urbanikova & Hanikova, 2021).

The journalists of Agence France-Presse (AFP), as Chetwynd (2020) finds, constantly tried to cope up with arising situations, and changed their strategies to perform professional responsibilities under the pandemic (Chetwynd, 2020). The regular news production routines of Portuguese journalists, as Miranda et al. (2021) find, changed during the lockdown phases that made journalists socially isolated, narrowing down opportunities to share their professional concerns with peers (Miranda et al., 2021). The journalists in the USA also adapted themselves to the changed working procedures in the early days of the pandemic (Hoak, 2021).

At the initial stages of the pandemic, many organisations came up with suggestions and guidelines on the protection of journalists' health. The World Health Organization (2020c) recommended journalists to use masks, maintain physical distance from un-well people, conduct telephone interviews, and clean equipment during their work. While Jooste (2020) and Committee to Protect Journalists (2020) separately proposed the use of

proper safety gears, the ACOS Alliance (n.d.) advocated for arranging health insurance and medical care for journalists. The World Health Organization (2020b), ACOS Alliance (n.d.), Jooste (2020), Committee to Protect Journalists (2020) and the Coalition for Women in Journalism (2020) further stressed monitoring the mental health of journalists when they worked in the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

This study has taken the Theory of Communication Competence, and Risk and Crisis Communication Management Theory as the theoretical framework to examine the strategies that Bangladeshi newspaper journalists followed in their professional responsibilities and in coping up with the situations in the COVID-19 crisis. The Theory of Communication Competence, developed by Brian Spitzberg & William Cupach, considers the capacity of effecting adaptation in a certain situation as competence (Littlejohn et al., 2017). According to Spitzberg and Cupach, competence is often associated with "an individual's interpersonal skills, along with the accompanying knowledge and motivation...in a particular interactional context" (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 74). Besides, as the theorists argue, competence is an interdependent process that can be effective in both micro and macro aspects (Littlejohn et al., 2017). As the newspaper journalists of Bangladesh continued their work under the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers believe that journalists needed to adapt themselves to new plans of action to carry out their journalistic roles and cope up with the changed realities.

The authors depend on the Risk and Crisis Communication Management Theory of Matthew Seeger to evaluate the organisational techniques, introduced and followed by news managers, in case of running the daily newsroom operations under the pandemic. The Risk and Crisis Communication Management Theory discusses the practices that an organisation should follow to adapt to the situations that appear in risk and crisis periods (Littlejohn et al., 2017). While risk communication, according to Seeger, deals with issues related to health, crisis communication concentrates on public relations and the repair of organisational images (Seeger, 2006). Theorist Seeger pins down nine practices that an organisation should follow in risk and crisis management communications. Some of the Seeger advocated exercises, which are most likely relatable to the present study, are -- process approaches and policy development; pre-event planning; listening to audience's concerns; honesty, candour, and openness; collaborating and coordinating with credible sources; communicating with compassion and empathy; accepting uncertainty, ambiguity and depending on self-efficacy (Seeger, 2006). The recent reviews of the theory suggest a renewal of organisation's image, not a restoration of it by giving emphasis on the approach -- "learning and growing from a crisis" (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 375).

Methods

The technique of in-depth interview which is "widely" used in qualitative research due to its flexibility (Bryman, 2008) was followed in this study to collect data. The uniqueness of this method lies in the small size of the sample, specific answering, detailed background, and probability of influence (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The authors conducted interviews with 12 journalists from three Dhaka-based national dailies – Prothom Alo, Samakal and The Daily Star. The first two are Bengali dailies and The Daily Star is an English newspaper. Two reporters, one sub-editor and one news manager from each newspaper were interviewed online separately using a video teleconferencing application. The interview sessions were on average one hour long and recorded with permission from the interviewees who all were male and aged between 35 to 50 years. Separate semi-structured questionnaires were used as per the professional role of the interviewees – reporter, sub-editor, and news manager.

Three dailies were selected as samples following the purposive sampling technique that allows choosing of samples to fulfil "specific characteristics or qualities" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 94). Besides, reputation of journalistic work, the circulation figures of the dailies were taken into consideration in case of selecting the samples. As per the Department of Films and Publications (2020) data, the circulation of Prothom Alo, Samakal and The Daily Star were 5,01,800, 2,71,000 and 44,814 respectively in June 2020, and these dailies started their operations in 1998, 2005 and 1991 respectively (Hredoy, 2019).

The findings of the study have been divided under six thematic areas – limited preparations and lack of plans; struggle in information gathering and working from home; pressures, restrictions and standards of the news; fear, stress and insecurity (all applicable for RQ1); increasing dependency on internet-based platforms (for RQ2); and new experiences in newsroom operations (for RQ3). While the messages that are given by the interviewees are summarized under themes (Rubin and Rubin cited in Saldana, 2016), the themeing the data technique is "...applicable to interviews and participant-generated documents..." (Saldana, 2016). Basic categorization technique has been used to generate themes from the data in this study, where, according to Gibson and Brown (2009, pp. 128-129), "the researcher looks for how various themes are similar, how they are different, and what kinds of relationships may exist between them" (cited in Saldana, 2016, p. 202).

Findings

Limited Preparations and Lack of Plans

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 virus had been gradually engulfing the world territories since its detection in China in December 2019, all the three dailies seemed unprepared to deal with the arising situations following the

outbreak of the pandemic in Bangladesh on 08 March 2020. On preparations, a sub-editor of Prothom Alo said,

This was an incomparable experience. We knew it (COVID-19) was coming to us. But, we were not prepared to handle the new realities.

A sub-editor of Samakal thought there was a policy-level crisis in accessing the entire situation in the early stages of the pandemic. An assistant news editor of The Daily Star said they did not have concrete ideas on how to deal with pandemic crises.

The Prothom Alo journalists had been working in usual fashion until the government declared a countrywide holiday in late March. At that point, Prothom Alo started asking its employees -- aged, female, and those who were at high health risk -- to work from home. Later, all the employees started working from home.

A sub-editor of The Daily Star said the announcement to begin the "working from home" policy struck journalists strongly as they were not mentally prepared for adapting themselves to it until late March 2020. The Daily Star journalists started working from home on 9 April 2020 and they were in that process when the authors interviewed journalists in August 2020.

The journalists of Samakal limited their outdoor activities at the beginning. Though Samakal practised a "24/7 office stay" policy forming small teams by journalists in between May-June 2020, the paper returned to its usual pre-COVID-19 routines in August 2020.

Struggles in Information Gathering and Working from Home

The reporters of all the three dailies struggled in collecting information for news during the periods of shutdown. A health correspondent of Prothom Alo said journalists faced difficulties in collecting information and verifying facts during the lockdown phases. He said:

...I was getting information that patients in hospitals were not receiving due treatment...How would I verify this allegation?...I talked three to four times a day over the phone with a journalist who was admitted to a hospital at that moment.

Another reporter of Prothom Alo said it was hard to get all required information talking over the phone because of the disruptions in network and internet connections. Reporters of Samakal thought the production of exclusive and investigative stories declined as journalists often failed to gather required information and documents. A reporter of Samakal said he sometimes submitted stories without covering required aspects of them as he failed to gather and crosscheck necessary information. A Daily Star reporter who covers crimes, said he struggled in gathering news as

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journalists' access to the government offices were restricted. The task of filing an investigative or an issue-based special story, for this reporter, was like a "herculean task". Besides, the circulation of rumours about COVID-19 on social media made his job harder. The flow of news in Samakal newsroom also decreased at that period, said a news editor.

Furthermore, the journalists grappled with adapting themselves to the "working from home" method. One of them said, "It was never possible to create an office-like environment at home." A senior reporter of The Daily Star treated working from the home as a challenge and experienced trouble while collecting information over the phone from the officials. About working from home, a news manager of The Daily Star said,

It was never the same as working from the office. Distractions were always there and concentration level was never similar.

On the other hand, a journalist of Prothom Alo treated the COVID-19 pandemic as a "big event" in his career and continued visiting hospitals and graveyards for stories.

The reporters of Samakal did not struggle in separating facts from rumours while working under the pandemic. But one sub-editor of Samakal had experienced mental pressure while staying continuously at office for a month being far from his family.

Pressures, Restrictions and Standards of News

Most of the interviewees said they did not confront any form of "additional" pressure during the pandemic. Nevertheless, an interviewee said he felt an exercise of "self-censorship", when he was working on a story about the unwillingness of doctors to offer treatment to COVID 19 patients in hospitals. Another interviewee told authors that the level of self-censorship in Samakal was "high" as the paper highly depended on the government advertisements during the early months of the crisis. According to him, journalists served under "continuous fear", accelerated by internal and external factors.

A reporter of The Daily Star maintained an "additional level of cautiousness" while reporting on bilateral affairs. As he told that he filed a story, linked to an "apparent and real pressure" on Bangladesh from a powerful neighbour over not allowing trial of a COVID-19 vaccine in the country, with "fear and confusion", also in a "suggestive way".

About the surge of rumours and mis-/disinformation, some reporters struggled a bit in locating accurate information when falsehoods were mounting on social media. However, some of the reporters and news managers did not face such trouble.

Most of the reporters said they neither compromised with the principles of journalism nor standard of stories under the pandemic. Though one reporter

said he often had to shorten the size of his copies as his house reduced its pages.

However, sub-editors of these dailies felt that the number of errors in copies increased when the reporters had been working from home. According to a Samakal sub-editor, in cases they published unedited copies due to a shortage of manpower.

On the other hand, The Daily Star interviewees compromised with the values of stories in multiple forms. As reporters said they compromised with the overall standard of some stories. The news managers too compromised with treatments of some stories due to a drop in news flow. The journalists, according to a sub-editor, were initially instructed not to concentrate too much on producing error-free stories but to meet the deadlines.

Fear, Stress and Insecurity

The interviewees said a sense of fear gripped them as the first COVID-19 case was identified in Bangladesh. On top of that, all of them were afraid of contracting the virus every time they went to the field or office. A sub-editor of Samakal told authors that he was worried about the safety of his family members. These fears soon turn into psychological pressure. A Prothom Alo reporter said,

I had to come in close contact with people when I was in the field. Therefore, I was worried about the safety of my son and in-laws.

A sub-editor of The Daily Star said,

I passed many days with a hope that the next day will be a better one. But, there was no difference.

A Prothom Alo news manager said around 50 employees of the organisation contracted COVID-19 as of October 2020. Prothom Alo appointed two physicians to provide medical support to its employees and their families. Samakal extended financial support to its employees in need, and signed a contract with a private hospital in Dhaka. According to a sub-editor of Samakal, some journalists of the paper left jobs on the grounds of their safety. Deaths of fellow journalists in COVID-19 came as another source of mental pressure to a reporter of Samakal.

However, a reporter of The Daily Star preferred going to the field as he believed that a table-made story cannot portray the actual picture. Another reporter of the same house used to go outside whenever an important development broke out in his beat.

All of these newspapers supplied personal protective gears to its journalists. However, most of the journalists had to collect protective gears on their own arrangement too. An interviewee said he wore a raincoat sometimes instead of PPE to protect himself. He spent more than Tk 25,000 (around \$294) himself to purchase protective gears.

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Prothom Alo and Samakal prepared and distributed a list of guidelines among the employees to reduce the risk of contracting the virus. Besides, the interviewees followed the guidelines of WHO.

Though all the three dailies had paid salaries regularly to its employees but they had sacked around 80 of its employees to reduce costs, which escalated the level of stress of the journalists. The interviewees were either "worried" or "sad" or "disturbed" watching dismissals of their colleagues. The following statement of a Prothom Alo sub-editor said it all.

Losing a job under a pandemic is an inhuman matter...I could not put my thoughts aside for a second that my name was not on that list.

Another interviewee said,

A feeling of uncertainty gripped us when the office started dismissing journalists.

Another interviewee said he tried to produce something almost every day just to show the office that he was not sitting idle at his place.

Increasing Dependency on Internet-based Platforms

The dependency on communication technologies increased when the journalists had been working from home. The interviewees used Whatsapp, Zoom, Facebook Messenger and Email to do necessary communication.

But the demand for using internet-based communication platforms appeared as a challenge before one of Samakal's correspondents and a sub-editor of The Daily Star. A Sub-editor of Prothom Alo thought his work pressure multiplied while operating communication technologies.

But a sub-editor of Samakal felt a technological shift took place as many journalists of the paper learnt operating modern internet-based applications under the pandemic. While explaining the situation, a news manager of The Daily Star said,

It was like either you evolve or you die as an individual, a professional or a newspaper.

New Experiences in Newsroom Operations

At first, Prothom Alo authorities ensured everybody practising social distancing inside the office. Later, they gradually reduced the physical presence of journalists in newsroom operations. Finally, all journalists started working from home on 21 April 2020 and followed it till 4 August 2020.

To overcome the challenge of the pandemic, Samakal initiated a "camp in office" strategy in May 2020. A news editor said authorities constituted two teams incorporating 34 to 36 members each -- mostly journalists from the desk sections. Each team stayed inside the office 24/7 for one month. This plan, however, collapsed after a couple of months when around 20

members of a team including the editor of the paper were diagnosed as COVID-19 carriers. The journalists at that stage worked under extra pressure, a news editor told, adding that Samakal's newsroom operations came back to the original order in August 2020.

The first challenge for news managers, as an assistant news editor of The Daily Star thought, in operating the newsroom from remote was ensuring participation of journalists, who were traditionally comfortable in face-to-face dealings, in online communications. The Daily Star news managers were not "worried" about running newsroom operations from distance as a customised software, installed in 2019, allowed journalists to continue all of their works from remote.

One of the challenges that news managers of other two dailies faced in running the newsroom from distance was doing the page make-up. The entire process was time-consuming in virtual platform. A Prothom Alo news manager said they needed to remain connected over the phone for hours. At a certain point, Prothom Alo reduced the number of pages to 12 from the regular 16 or 20-page publication as it witnessed a fall in circulation and the flow of advertisements, the news manager told. Samakal also minimised the size of the paper -- from 16 to 12 pages -- to reduce costs because of the same crises. The Daily Star also came down to a 12-page printed daily from the usual 16-page in April 2020 as the paper witnessed an 80 percent drop in circulation at a stage and stopped printing the second edition for a couple of months as the number of news and advertisement dropped.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has tried to explore the strategic changes in journalistic practices and newsroom management during the initial attack of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. From the in-depth interviews, the study has understood that there was a policy-level shortcoming in terms of formulating plans to face the challenges arrived along with the pandemic and affected the journalistic practices in newspapers of Bangladesh. Though the newspaper journalists, after the global spreading trend of the novel coronavirus, imagined that the COVID-19 crisis would hit Bangladesh any day, they hardly took preparations beforehand -- until the government announced general holiday in late March 2020 -- to deal with the emerging pandemic realities. Due to the absence of preparations, the COVID-19 crisis appeared as a blow before the journalists, and they worked under new working environments during the pandemic. This paper has also revealed that newspaper reporters struggled in collecting information and verifying facts during the shutdown phases, as their access to many infrastructures was restricted. Besides, the process of gathering news, and doing other professional communions relying entirely on virtual communication methods was challenging for the journalists. This study has further realised that the level of dependency of journalists on modern communication technologies and the internet increased during the pandemic.

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Despite the presence of rumours and other types of falsehoods, the newspaper journalists did not encounter mentionable difficulties in separating facts from falsehoods because of their professionalism. The journalists, as this study has also found, were not comfortable in adapting themselves to the working from home method, leaving behind their conventional practices of working from office and doing face-to-face communications. The journalists went through a certain level of stress as they continued working from their homes for weeks. In addition, the standard of stories, and production of news were affected in many ways. This paper has also disclosed that journalists were tense about the protection of themselves and their families as they needed to expose themselves to the public set-ups before, during, and after the lockdown spells. Some journalists were disturbed as they received insufficient protective gears from office. Furthermore, a section of journalists suffered from a sense of insecurity of losing jobs as the newspaper authorities sacked journalists during the crisis. Besides, some journalists occasionally faced in-house pressures due to internal and external factors that included restrictions, surveillance, and an increased reliance on government advertisements.

While the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) believes that financial constraints under the pandemic brought an "existential threat" before the news sector around the globe, the newspaper organisations in Bangladesh were also financially affected by the pandemic as the circulation and flow of advertisements of the papers decreased sharply during the crisis. To mitigate this challenge, the newspapers implemented several strategies including cutting the number of pages, limiting the publication to one edition and terminating employees to lessen the costs.

The findings of this study suggest that the managerial bodies of the newspapers in Bangladesh have concentrated more on their capital accumulation and profit-generating processes than safeguarding the physical and mental health of their employees which have been also found in the study of Perreault and Perreault (2021), where journalists have been found in both responsible and vulnerable positions at the same time. Study of Garcia-Aviles (2021) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, situations like work overload, psychological distress and job insecurity have been raised among journalistic professions which is also similar with the current study. This phenomenon indicates a grave shortcoming in achieving required professionalism in the newspaper industry. The authors recommend effective initiatives to mitigate this concern for the proper flourishing of journalistic practices and stakeholders in the newspaper sector in Bangladesh.

Limitations of the Study

The state of journalistic practices in the local newspapers under the pandemic was not explored in this paper. Besides, the sample size and the number of interviewees in this study were relatively small to assess the

detailed picture of the newspaper journalism practices during the pandemic in Bangladesh. Moreover, the findings of this study are subject to change with the time as the research was conducted at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.

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