

BANGLADESH: A MAPPING OF INNOVATIVE MEDIA

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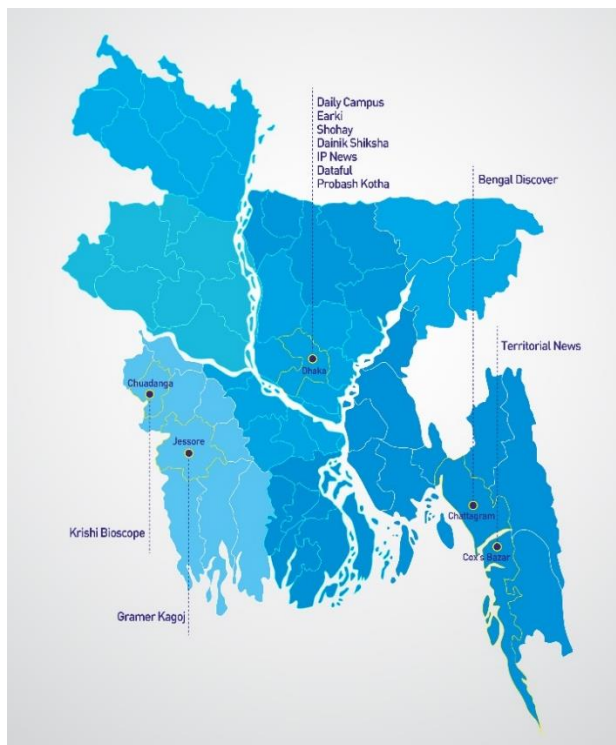
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Summary

This report contains the findings of a mapping of innovative and public interest media in Bangladesh, carried out by Digitally Right for International Media Support (IMS) Asia Regional Programme in the period 7 November to 15 December 2021. The study covers three main regions and consulted 130 people and media, including thorough desk research and existing information available. This report describes the overall media environment in 2021, but for privacy protection reasons does not include names of people interviewed or internal details of media houses contacted.

Bangladesh, with more than 160 million people and a fast-growing economy, is one of the largest media markets in Asia. Once dominated by the newspapers, media consumption in this country observed a shift in the past two decades with the emergence of private satellite tv channels to become the largest source of news and information to the people.



Regional distribution of 11 mapped media.

As of 2020, Bangladesh has 45 private television channels, 28 FM radio stations, 1,248 daily newspapers, and [hundreds of online news portals](#) makes the market heavily served compared to other similar markets. However, people remained far from reaping the benefits of such a robust media presence due to eroding civic space, political control over media ownership and licensing, and [a high level of self-censorship](#).

On the one hand, there is a persistent threat from the state, and on the other hand, a culture of [“predatory corporatization”](#) -- as termed by one of the most respected editors in Bangladesh -- has led to a loss of credibility of news media in general, while the need for the audience to be informed and entertained remained unchanged. As the mainstream continues to compromise, the young audiences start to move online, and social media platforms have become their go-to place to access information.

This new and growing online media space is fragmented, where different interest groups are trying to reach new audiences with innovative approaches. With the lack of quality content, misinformation and clickbait portals begin to fill on the internet. However, there are three major trends in the digital: small, local, and issue-based media initiatives providing informative content in innovative formats; individual influencers and bloggers gaining new ground to express dissent; and the mainstream media investing in digital to catch up with the change. They are leveraging two common factors: a large young population and [increased accessibility to the internet](#).

This study mapped 11 innovative and public interest media initiatives in Bangladesh seeking to reach diverse audience groups and communities with news and information in a changing media landscape.

Each of these media initiatives has its unique strengths and weaknesses but managed to thrive to continue to provide information to the community they serve.

However, the online media space is chaotic, and media innovation in Bangladesh is still in a very immature stage. Independent journalists' inability to try out new ideas and risk investments to startup a public interest media is often ascribed to [the restrictive licensing system](#) and repressive laws. The uncertainty that government may not allow them media registration and can block the site anytime — as it happened with a few initiatives — remains one of the biggest constraints for innovation.

Therefore, there are more innovations and investments in media that offer information contents around important social and economic – and potentially less-sensitive subjects like health, agriculture, migration, and education. These initiatives (for example, Shohay, Krishi Bioscope) manage to grow hundreds of thousands of followers on different platforms, engage audiences not only as consumers but also as a part of the content development process, and contribute to social and human development. Most of these initiatives are youth-led and seem to find ways to generate revenue by adopting innovative strategies.

The local media, struggling to compete with the large mainstream newsrooms and financially hit by the pandemic, are seeking new business models in digital. Hundreds of new online outlets are mushrooming across the country, and video has become a new trend in the local and hyperlocal space. Live broadcasts on Facebook and YouTube, daily video stories, and news bulletins emerged as main monetization tools. However, ethics, morality, and skills are overarching challenges in local media. Only a handful of classic and trusted local newspapers (for example, Gramer Kagoj), seemingly developing strategies to transform themselves digitally.

The relative opportunity offered by the internet is also under threat, particularly by the Digital Security Act (DSA) that makes “negative propaganda” punishable by up to 14 years in prison. Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), a local civil society organization, analyzed [668 cases filed under DSA](#) since 2020 and found that more than 20% of those are against journalists.

Despite the pressure, new youth-led initiatives are attempting to circumvent the information control. While most of those initiatives are operated from exile or anonymously, few locally rooted initiatives (for example, satire site Earki) are fostering democratic participation, creating public debate, and raising awareness on critical issues in innovative ways to reach millions of people with memes, articles, and social media posts.

Bangladesh lacks independent and public interest media initiatives similar to Rappler in the Philippines, Malaysiakini, Frontier Myanmar, and The Wire in India. An industry dominated by mainstream outlets, the absence of non-profit journalism initiatives, and an almost non-existent freelance journalism culture - made the journalists solely dependent on jobs and vulnerable to corporate and political interests.

Entrepreneurial interest and digital skills among journalists are scarce and found to be a key challenge for innovation and sustainability of independent public interest media. Even the media outlets mapped for this study reflect critical skill gaps in organization management, use of technology to grow audience, and develop business models.

Context

Bangladesh has a history of a strong and vibrant media industry. Since its independence to every democratic movement, media has played a significant role in shaping public opinion and holding the powerful accountable. However, this legacy faces one of its toughest challenges posed by various factors, including the state's attempt to control and regulate media, newsrooms falling behind to keep pace with the digital transformation, and partisan ownership structure driving censorship.

The industry is still dominated by television and newspapers, though the audience has hundreds of outlets to serve. However, the benefit of robust media availability is undermined by a repressive environment and weak institutions. Introduction of stringent licensing requirements, abuse of Digital Security Act, and an eroding civic space - drowned Bangladesh to 152 in the World Press Freedom Index, by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

Only a handful of news outlets in Bangladesh dare to speak to the power. "The relationship that a media owner has with the government can influence whether a media outlet receives a license. Politicians themselves own media outlets, which then serve as a mouthpiece for their platforms," said a recent study by [CGS](#). It leaves a large number of media outlets available, but the demand for investigative and rights-focused content is hardly met.

High self-censorship and lack of quality content led the younger audience to rely increasingly on the internet, already overwhelmed with misinformation and different interest groups. Individual-led and social media-based (YouTube and Facebook) channels catering to specific communities, providing useful information, and using digital skills to reach the younger audience are on the rise.

At the same time, some initiatives make the most of the digital opportunities to render public interest content, represent marginalized voices in society, and cover underreported issues at a hyperlocal level. New outlets emerged on data journalism, countering misinformation, environment, education, health, and migration – although very few could make an impact.

This study identifies and maps some of those outlets that have the potential to build and sustain a community through active engagement and outreach. While doing so, it also seeks to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and challenges to be sustainable in a challenging media environment.

Audience demography

Demographically, Bangladesh has a large population and it is one of the countries with highest densities. According to World Bank data, 38% of Bangladeshi population live in urban areas and growth in urban population has been around 4% in the past decade. Urbanization is mainly driven by access to quality health, education and other public services including the internet. It also means that the people living in cities and towns have more and better access to media and information in a Bangladesh context. For example, while [adult literacy rate](#) (15+ years) in urban areas is 83%, it remained only 70% in the rural areas. Similarly, rural dwellers are lagging behind in internet access as much as 38% compared to urban dwellers, according to a report by [LIRNEasia](#).

[BTRC data](#) suggests that the number of active internet connections in Bangladesh is roughly 129 million though according to [DataReportal](#), internet penetration is 28.8% of the population. Even taking the BTRC data into consideration, only 8% of people have broadband connection, mostly reserved to urban

areas. The disparate access to high-speed internet is widening the urban-rural divide in access to media as well. A BIGD study suggests even higher gender gap in internet access as women are [62% less likely to use the internet](#) and 34% less likely to own a mobile phone than men.

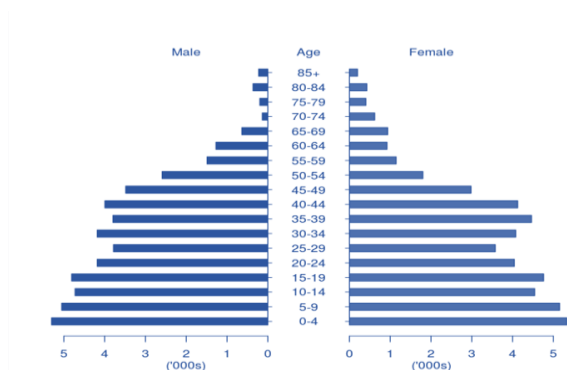


Chart 2: Projected Bangladeshi population pyramid 2021

One of the key features of the demographic pyramid of Bangladesh is relatively high proportion of young people. UNFPA data shows that ages between 15-24 years make up [nearly 20% of population](#). The National Youth Policy of Bangladesh defined the youth as between the age of 18-35. Under this definition, youth consist one third of the population. [Bangladesh National ICT Household Survey](#) shows that internet users in the country are more likely to be young men living in urban areas and predominantly between 15-34

years old. The users tend to be higher educated than the non-users.

The demography of Bangladeshi media audience:

- > A robust young audience compared to other age groups
- > More than 80 million (15+) rural audience with limited access to technology
- > Growing urban audience (more than 40 million) with better access to education and internet
- > Women, consisting half of the population, have lesser access to technology than men
- > Audience with internet access are better educated than men

Media Consumption

The audience demography largely explains the media consumption pattern in Bangladesh. According to a national media literacy survey by MRDI and UNICEF 75% of the Bangladeshi audience prefers television as a main source of news. Women, with lesser access to internet, are prone to watch television more than the men in both urban and rural locations. A very distant, but second preference for news is social media, particularly Facebook. However, the ratio of male Facebook users is more than double than the female users.

"Though it takes time, print media is the most reliable regarding authenticity. They get enough time to cross check information while electronic media publish news instantly."

(Female, 24 years, Savar)

"I prefer to watch live coverage of TV channel pages. It seems to me more accurate"

(Male, 22 years, Mymensingh)

"Now everyone is a journalist. Everyone gives updates and information he knows on Facebook"

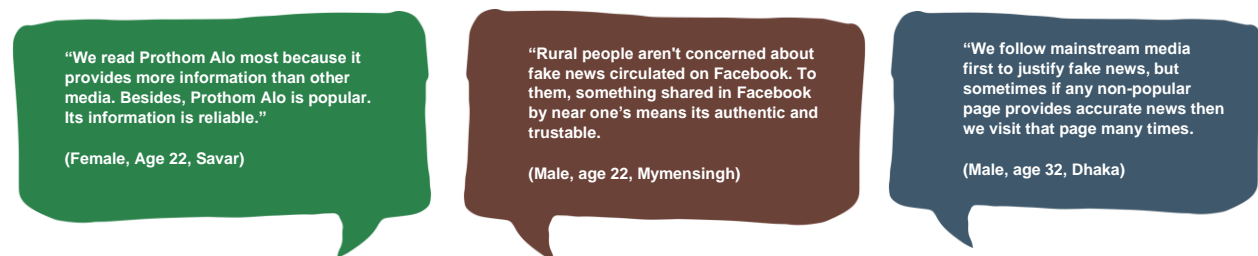
(Male, 25 years, Dhaka)

Comments from FGD participants on their preferred media

Print outlets lost significant ground to TV channels and growing [social media use](#). The MRDI survey finds that only 8.4% of the respondents consider newspapers as the main source of news. Four focus group discussions, conducted under this study with male and female audiences in three districts, reflects the

same reality. Participants mentioned television as the platform of choice, followed by online. And even though the audience prefer online over print, they trust the newspapers more than the websites.

When asked about favorite media outlets both female and male audiences are found to rely on large mainstream media outlets, while Daily Prothom Alo topped in all the discussions. There was general consensus on popular TV channels and newspapers, but choices appeared to vary on the online news portals. The rural audiences are found to be less concerned about the name of the media and prone to read or watch all sources the get on social media feeds. After further probe, most of the audiences mentioned that they read the online version of newspapers, more than the print edition.



Comments from FGD participants on consumption behavior

FGDs and interviews reveal mushrooming local news initiatives in the form of Facebook pages and YouTube channels. These are led by local journalists and provides daily live coverage of local news, straight from the spot and gaining attention of the hyper local audience. They are leveraging the strength of local dialect and producing contents in a vernacular tone to gain popularity. However, there are debates about quality and ethical standard of these initiatives. Another key finding is the growing popularity of Islamic sites and social media channels and they are particularly gaining audience among the rural segment.

There is a general consensus among the audiences is that media in Bangladesh are controlled by the government and they cannot publish public interest contents. Some argued that some level of government monitoring is essential to tackle misinformation and fake news, but media needs space to serve the public interest.

Key media consumption trend:

- > Women watch TV mostly and contributing to the large television audience
- > Mainstream media outlets are still trusted the most
- > Social media news audience is growing, but with deep skepticism
- > Content providers on public issues are becoming more popular than news sites
- > There is an absence of quality online media and contents
- > Media hardly meets the audience expectation for public interest news
- > Online media consumption is dominated by entertainment genre
- > Video is the most popular format on social media and mainstream outlets are yet to catch up
- > Most people are not ready to pay for online news but only for education and entertainment

Learnings from the mapping

This study maps some of the innovative and public interest media in Bangladesh that strives to build and sustain a community with active engagement, and serve the public interest with quality content. They are diverse in size and focus, cover different geographies, engage a wide range of communities, and have a distinct journalistic approach to produce and distribute content.

It identifies more than 20 initiatives ranging from local, national, issue-focused, and community-based. Some are traditional news providers focusing on investigations and public accountability, some produce information content on critical social issues, and some go beyond the conventional sense of journalism to innovate ways to ignite public debate.

Eleven initiatives are selected finally for mapping based on their journalistic profile, the extent of outreach, and level of development, and each ranked on a scale of 5 in the three assessment criteria. However, this process of mapping that included focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, content analysis, field trips, and thorough desk research offered a deeper look into the state of media innovation in Bangladesh, related challenges and opportunities. Here are key learnings:

1. Innovative media: Media innovation in Bangladesh is still in a premature stage. Startups are emerging in the content space as individual-led initiatives providing information to a community begin to transform into an organization. Using technology to distribute content, gathering audience analytics for decision making, and engaging audiences with different tools – appear to be rare. The use of digital tools goes as far as SEO, maximizing social media outreach with video, graphics, and creative multimedia content. Most of the editors interviewed suggested that the need to build capacity of team members in digital audience engagement and storytelling.

2. Public interest media: Demand for the public interest, investigative, and accountability journalism – has never been so high in Bangladesh. But the demand is seldom matched by new enterprising and innovative outlets. Reasons are often attributed to government control, legal harassment, and licenses regulation. Journalists appear to be afraid of taking risks to invest in new initiatives as they believe critical news outlets may not get permission for registration. No venture capital or investment funds are willing to invest in public interest reporting.

3. Nonprofit independent media: Nonprofit journalism is nonexistent in Bangladesh, mainly because of legal challenges. To register a nonprofit (company, or society, or NGO), one must have positive verification reports from intelligence agencies, approval from the related ministry, and wait for 2/3 years, if lucky. Neither there are local Philanthropies to support independent media, similar to the IPS Media Foundation in India. Receiving foreign donations requires approval from the NGO Affairs Bureau, an organization under the PMO. An NGO is subject to monthly reporting to different government offices. It makes setting up an independent nonprofit media in Bangladesh very challenging.

4. Issue-focused media: New and innovative media startups are entering in health and education field, targeting the large middle-class urban audience segment and eyeing the advertising revenue from robust pharmaceutical companies and private educational institutions. Nearly a dozen websites find a niche in agriculture, thanks to the rural audience and growing agricultural industry. Corporate groups that invested in agricultural marketing, machinery production, and chemical industries back some of these portals. However, there has been inadequate effort around critically important issues like climate change and environment, gender, and human rights because of lack of corporate interest and an

associated market. Founders of an environmental and an indigenous rights news site said that without grants and donations it is tough for them to sustain.

5. Local and hyperlocal media: After the [Covid-19 shock](#), local media outlets realized the importance of digital. A key aspect of their strategy is video. According to three editors, newsrooms now can engage more audiences and earn more revenue from Facebook and YouTube with live broadcasts, talk shows, and video stories. They are also facing competition from dozens of new social media-based news providers taking advantage of the video trend. Such initiatives are mushrooming from every corner of Bangladesh, and most lack basic journalistic standards. It requires an intense study to look into the depth of corrupt practices in the local media space, that was somewhat captured during this mapping.

7. Business model: Bangladeshi media is substantially dependent on advertising revenue. Adopting or experimenting with subscription or membership models are rare. Prothom Alo, the largest newspaper in Bangladesh, has a paywall for its e-paper but failed to gain much revenue. However, younger outlets like Earki and Shohay are weighing the potential of a subscription-based revenue model. They lack the technical capacity to roll it soon. Sponsored content is a newfound success for a few outlets, an area that media is approaching with optimism.

8. Media management: Innovative media initiatives are yet to develop a stable organizational structure. Written mission statements or strategies are absent in almost all cases. Neither do they have the talents or skills to raise funds or develop a business plan. News outlets are often focused on content only and lack the understanding that administration, business, and technology are equally important. Incubators helping talents grow entrepreneurial and media management skills - is considered as needs of the time by the journalists.

Bangladesh's digital media largely banks on Facebook, Google and YouTube. According to advertisers, media as an industry is left far behind in digital transformation compared to others in e-commerce, education and even manufacturing. Although large newspapers and TV channels have developed online editions, according to advertisers, marketing people are more concerned with selling space and air time, rather than pitching reporting and news programming that is uniquely designed for digital media audiences.

As advertisers look to reach more consumers online, the shift to digital advertising will accelerate, and it will further exacerbate the challenges for media in a fast-changing market. To adapt with this change existing media outlets need to innovate and adopt efficient process, and on the other hand, new entrepreneurs must come up with innovative and localized approaches -- for the uniqueness of legal and other challenges -- to produce and distribute contents and to reach to a greater audience.

List of abbreviations

BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BNYP	National Youth Policy of Bangladesh
BTRC	Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission
CGS	Centre for Governance Studies
DSA	Digital Security Act
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GIJN	Global Investigative Journalism Network
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMS	International Media Support
IPSMF	Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
KII	Key Informant Interview
MRDI	Management and Resources Development Initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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