

How the Bangladeshi Media use the RTI Act for Free and Qualitative Reporting

ASSESSMENT REPORT



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Executive Summary

Enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009 is considered as a milestone in the history of Bangladesh's legislation and regulations. It is regarded as a people's law because it has empowered the citizens to claim information they need from the authorities. Unlike other laws which are applied on people by the government, this law is applied by the citizens on the government offices and other authorities.

Media, as the fourth column of the state and an influential social force, keeps people informed about what is happening around and alerts the government and other authorities about what should or should not happen. The RTI Act has opened up opportunities for the journalists to gather information from authorities to develop in-depth and investigative reports for the media. But are they using the act to derive optimum results? Do they feel comfortable in using the act? Do they face challenges in doing so? What are the ways to overcome the challenges?

These questions need to be answered. MRDI carried out an assessment to answer these questions with the support from Embassy of Switzerland to Bangladesh through a qualitative analysis of the trend of use of the act by journalists for writing news stories. The study aimed to identify experiences of journalists in using the act, find out the challenges and collate findings to work out some recommendations for actions.

In carrying out the assessment, key informant interview (KII), news content analysis, analysis of complaints to the information commission by journalists, secondary document analysis and focus group discussion (FGD) methodologies were applied. Key informants including information commissioner, editors, reporters, activists and academics were interviewed to get their opinion on how the use of RTI Act can improve the quality of media reporting. Media reports applying and without applying the RTI Act were analyzed and compared to have an understanding of the use effectiveness of the Act in reporting. Complaints submitted to the Information Commission were analyzed to identify the stake of journalists in the process and the extent of using information obtained through RTI in media reporting. Some relevant documents were reviewed which added value to the study. Separate FGD sessions with media reporters and RTI activists were organized to authenticate the findings and gather some new opinions on the issue.

The study finds an overall positive attitude about the benefits of the RTI Act and potentials of its use by the journalists as an effective tool for producing quality in-depth and investigative reports. An opinion prevails that the act has already created some good examples of curbing corruption and promoting transparency in some areas by ensuring peoples' right to know. But these sporadic examples have not been able to create significant impact in the society. The volume of RTI usage in media reporting is still very low. Journalists mostly ask for information on the banking sector, finance issues, tender and procurement issues.

Journalists have a common feeling that the RTI Act has empowered them as seekers of information. They claim information from the authorities as a legal right. They find it

particularly useful when the subject of the news story is sensitive, and accessing information on such issues is difficult through conventional ways. Using the act substantially contributes to the improvement of the quality of reports.

Journalists want to use RTI Act as a supportive tool for news sourcing and confirmation, because it provides them the most authentic and evidence based source. But it happens that they do not receive complete information from the authority. Again, information collected through the act creates opportunities to dig out more. But fear and risk factors often discourage them to use the act for reporting.

Mixed opinions have been there on the experiences of using RTI as a news sourcing tool. The positive experience is that the tool provides opportunity of producing a quality story which gets prominent coverage. The other experience says, authorities often provide inadequate information and the journalist also runs the risk of deteriorating relationship with officials concerned. However, it is encouraging to find that journalists use almost all the information they get through the process of RTI application, appeal and complaint.

Regarding the impact, it is unanimously agreed that a report produced using RTI Act attains better quality. But concerning the social impact, different views exist. In some cases, media report on corruption and irregularity could draw attention of relevant authorities who took steps to address the issue. But there are cases where media report failed to yield any social impact. However, a good investigative report with authentic information definitely creates direct or indirect impact in the society.

A very small number of media houses provide support to the reporters to collect information by using RTI Act. Some of them also arrange training on the act for their reporters. But the common scenario is that the journalists use RTI Act on their own initiative. The media houses do not discourage or obstruct but they appear to be reluctant.

A major challenge the journalists face in the use of RTI is that it takes a long time to obtain the desired information. It may take a long time to complete the long process of deciding whether information will be given or not. It is very likely that the issue will lose its appeal by the time the information is available. RTI Act is not so far a preferred tool to many journalists because it puts them into the risk of straining relationship between reporters and their official sources. This is a big challenge. Due to lack of knowledge of journalists on record keeping at the public offices, the information they ask very often does not match with what is available. This delays the process of making information available. Attitude of the government officials has been identified as a major challenge by the Information Commission itself. The officials want to provide information to journalists informally rather than using the RTI Act to avoid hassles.

The issue of press freedom also came up as a topic for discussion during the study. The respondents of the study feel journalists face a lot of political and social pressure that causes self-censorship. Freedom of journalists is tied to the business interest of the media owners. Pattern of media ownership in Bangladesh leaves limited scope for journalists to exercise

freedom of expression. Media in Bangladesh looks apparently free but direct and indirect control by the Government is a vital factor.

The study suggests some recommendations for improvement of the situation. These include setting up of separate RTI wing in the media houses, in-house training of journalists for skill development on RTI Act, introducing award for in-depth and investigative reporting using RTI Act, training of Designated Officers on the act and how to interact with journalists, introducing data bank and shortening the time for getting information using RTI Act.

Though conducted in a very short period, the assessment has generated some important findings and recommendations. Translating these recommendations into actions will hopefully produce tangible results in making the RTI Act more useful to the media and the journalists and thus contribute to reduce corruption and promote transparency.

Introduction

This report presents the summary of findings of an assessment on use of RTI by Bangladeshi media for accurate, fair and quality reporting. With the support from Embassy of Switzerland to Bangladesh, MRDI carried out the assessment during Nov-Dec, 2016. The assessment has conducted a qualitative analysis of the trend of the usage of the Right to Information Act, 2009 by journalists to gather information for news stories. The assessment also has identified related elements including journalists' experiences on RTI use, the challenges they are facing in using RTI Act, and how the act is contributing to improve the quality of journalism. It contains several recommendations on how the act can be best used for generating quality investigative reports.

Background

Bangladesh has enacted the Right to Information Act, 2009 for empowerment of citizens and to help ensure their fundamental rights of freedom of thought, conscience and expression. The act intends to make the government, autonomous, statutory bodies and other private institutions constituted or run by government or foreign financing more transparent and accountable to the citizens. It allows all citizens of the country to seek information from the authorities. So unlike other laws which are applied on the people by the state authority, this act is applied by the people on the authorities. The act has opened up opportunities for the journalists to collect information and data from appropriate authorities to write in-depth and investigative reports for the media. Coverage of in-depth information by media will ensure transparency and accountability of the administration and the service providing authorities and thus contribute to reducing corruption and establishing good governance.

But it again depends upon how far journalists are utilizing this opportunity. Now, after seven years of enactment of the law, it is time to assess the extent of using the RTI Act by the journalists for preparing in-depth and investigative reports. Journalists and other citizens of the country can also exercise their constitutional right to freedom of expression by applying this act. This assessment has examined the understanding of media on the use of the RTI Act

and how they are being benefitted. The assessment conducted within a short period offers ideas and recommendations that can be used in future to devise interventions for improving quality of in-depth media reporting through proper use of the RTI Act.

Objective

To identify usage of RTI by Bangladeshi media for quality journalism the project/assessment attempts to address and answer the following topics:

- Experiences and challenges faced by journalists in receiving information using the RTI Act
- Main benefits from/challenges in using the information received based on the RTI Act

Methodology and Sampling:

- Key informant Interview (KII): 25 KIIs have been conducted involving information commissioner, editors, reporters, activists and academics. This has been aimed to collect opinion of the experts on how the use of RTI in media reporting can improve the quality, accuracy, objectivity and fairness of reports. It has also covered the challenges faced by media and the ways to overcome those.
- News content analysis: Contents of 10 selected reports, 5 using RTI and 5 not using RTI have been analyzed in terms of qualitative indicators like depth of information, authenticity, readability, clarity, source of information and use of data. Reports have been identified during the KIIs.
- Analysis of complaints to the Information Commission (IC): Results/verdicts of the 91 complaints filed to the IC by journalists during 2010- June 2016 have been analyzed to compare between the complaints by journalists and others. The analysis also has looked into how reporters use the obtained information in reporting.
- Secondary document analysis: The assessment also has reviewed secondary documents like annual reports and other publications of the Information Commission and experiences of journalists, publication, assessment findings and reports of the development organizations.
- Focus Group Discussion (FGD): Two (2) - one with reporters and the other with RTI activists. These two sessions have facilitated face to face interaction with journalists and activists. The discussions have helped to authenticate and validate the findings of the exercises conducted.
- Assessment findings sharing meeting: Initial findings and recommendations of the study have been presented before the media editors, gatekeepers, experts, academics and NGO activists in a sharing meeting at the national level. The team leader presented findings and recommendations and a panel of discussants put their opinions. Chief Guest and other guests of the meeting gave their feedback on the assessment and made some recommendations.

Limitations of the study

The main limitation was the time frame. The assessment had to be completed within a brief time span of five weeks. It has not been an easy task to analyze documents and news contents, organizing discussions and interviewing key informants within this short period. Still it was possible to complete the task on time because the team members worked hard and the respondents extended their full cooperation. Another constraint was separating journalists from the list of Complaints and Decisions of IC. Some of the journalists did not disclose their profession while submitting application. The other limiting factor was number of reports taken for content analysis was inadequate. It was a challenging task to find out reports that were produced using the RTI Act because reference of using RTI Act for reporting was not mentioned always.

Findings

General Impression on RTI Act

Respondents of interviews, participants of FGD sessions and discussants of the sharing meeting termed the RTI Act as an effective tool for making a positive change in the society. Media can use the tool for producing quality in-depth and investigative reports. They opined, the act can ensure peoples' right to know and has potential to reduce corruption and promote transparency. The act has already created some good examples.

After the act was promulgated, a considerable number of applications by the media were filed with different authorities seeking information. Media produced reports using information collected through the provision of the RTI Act. The essence of the act has influenced authorities and individuals that have been termed as a "good sign" by most respondents and discussants. However, they also highlighted that the act is yet to make desired impact as it is not being used adequately by the mass or by journalists.

Awareness of the citizens about how the act can be used and the benefits to be derived from it is still very low. Thus, the law has failed to make any significant contribution to reduce corruption or to increase accountability.

The extent to which Bangladesh has progressed socially, culturally, politically and economically, the RTI Act is far advanced than that. As a result, citizen's perception has yet to be grown. But we must continue our efforts.

Professor Dr. Md. Golam Rahman
Chief Information Commissioner
Information Commission, Bangladesh

It has been observed that RTI related news on events-based stories get routine media coverage. Reporters hardly produce any news items on their own initiatives. However, it was opined that RTI is not an alternative to traditional journalism practices.

While field reporters are increasingly showing interest in pursuing reports by using RTI, newsroom managers need to be more responsive and supportive.

The study also observed that the RTI Act has far advanced compared to the social, political, cultural and economic progress of the country.

Initiatives on the RTI Act

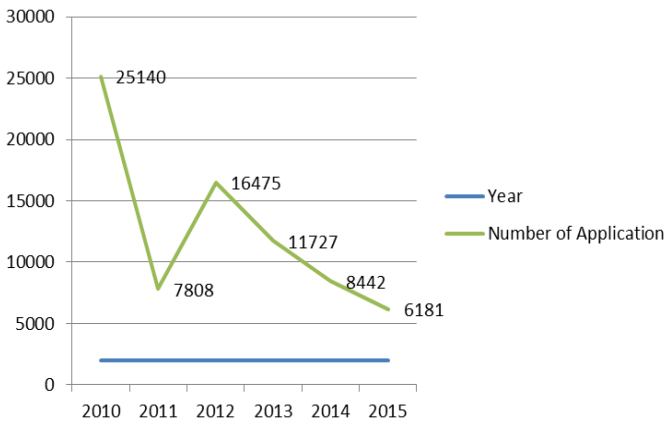
Since the enforcement of the act in 2009, several activities have been carried out by various organisations in implementing the act on both demand and supply ends. The Information Commission (IC), the statutory body that was formed under the RTI Act, is responsible to enforce and oversee the implementation of the act and it resolves eligible complaints. The IC has developed a good number of legal and awareness raising advocacy, communication and educational materials. Till the reporting period, the IC has ensured appointment of a total 24,103 Designated Officers of which 17,244 were in public offices and 6,859 in NGOs as per the act. The IC has been working with the Government and its offices and organized consultations and training for them in all the district and divisional headquarters. Now the IC has extended its program to the upazila level.

Recently, as a recommendation of the cabinet division's working group on RTI implementation, the government has formed a 16 member committee in each district with the following scope of work:

- Create awareness on the RTI Act, its rules and regulations
- Provide necessary support to people about their right to information and protection of the information provider
- Observe national and international days related to RTI and organize RTI training
- Coordinate RTI activities implemented by the government and NGOs at district level
- Provide necessary assistance to Information Commission regarding conflict resolution, investigation and implementation of the RTI Act.

Besides, a number of NGOs are also involved in implementing and promoting the RTI Act. Some of the organisations have specific projects on the RTI while others have integrated it as a crosscutting issue in project implementation. The interventions by NGOs mainly focus on creating citizen awareness, encouraging and empowering the citizen to ask for information which is somehow related to citizen's interest either individually or collectively. Moreover, some NGOs are also working on capacity building of the information providers through training and developing information disclosure guideline and proactive disclosure guideline.

Use of the RTI Act



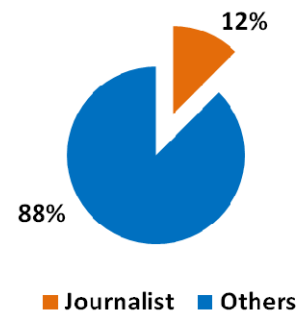
It appears from the reports of Information Commission that the number of RTI applications is declining. Since the beginning, a total of 75,773 individuals or organizations sought information under the provision of the act till the end of December 2015. The highest number of applications was filed in 2010, which was 33.18% of the total applications. In 2015, the number of applications was the lowest 6,181 (8.16%). The IC assumed that the

number of applications reduced due to increase in proactive disclosure (Information Commission Annual Report, 2016). However, the IC report provided no evidence to support this statement.

Complaint Analysis

The category of people who applied for RTI was identified by reviewing the complaints received by the IC. It is found that about 12% of the complaints to IC were submitted by the journalists. Other applicants included service holders, lawyers, teachers and freedom fighters. From January 2010 to June 2016, the IC received a total of 1304 complaints, 795 of which qualified for hearing. The land issues topped the list of subjects on which citizens asked for information followed by social safety net issues. The professionals requested for information relating to their services. The journalist community asked for information relating to banking sector, finance issues, tender and procurement issues.

Status of Complaint



Scope of Using the RTI Act for Journalism

The RTI Act can be “very helpful for in-depth and investigative journalism” as told by the respondents. The act safeguards the reporters as it equips them with documentary evidences. The journalists observed that, during the pre-RTI times, their status was vulnerable; anyone could refuse or ignore them. In the post-RTI, the journalists have a protection, and they feel empowered. The RTI Act is particularly useful when the issue or subject of the news story is sensitive, and accessing information on such issues is difficult through conventional means.

There have been some reports produced by different media on corruption and irregularities of influential public officials which would never have been unveiled without the use of the RTI Act. It also contributed to the improvement of the quality of reports as they said. However, the use of the law by journalists is still very low which makes it difficult to evaluate its impact on quality journalism. The use of the act resulted in changes in the mindset of the

public officials in many sectors. The act has helped increased access of journalists to different information system in the public offices.

RTI Use by reporters for News Sourcing

Reporters use traditional or conventional sources for collecting information which include formal and informal ones. Mostly, human sources are dominant but documentary sources such as news agency, handout, press release, meeting minutes or decisions, websites and social networking sites are also common. The RTI Act has been a supportive tool for news sourcing and confirmation. In some cases, journalists do not receive complete information from the authority using the RTI Act. Also, information collected through the act creates opportunities to dig out more. But fear and risk factors often discourage them to use the act for reporting because the reporter is then identified personally by the vested interest groups. Support from their employers is not available all the time.

Trend of Using RTI Act by Journalists as News Sourcing Tool

The assessment has found that the use of RTI Act for journalism is rather low. Respondents who asked for information through the RTI Act said they receive inadequate inputs against the information they ask for. However, potential deterioration of relationship with officials concerned prevents many journalists from digging deeper. At the same time, some respondents said they received ground-breaking information by using the RTI Act. A journalist has been identified who has used the RTI Act more frequently and systematically than others and his reports received much better coverage in his media outlet.

The IC received 1304 complaints out of which 795 were accepted for hearing as of June 30, 2016 since the beginning in 2010. The assessment reviewed the complaints and found 91 (12%) of them submitted by journalists. This figure included information seekers who disclosed their identity as a journalist in their complaints and some who complained as a general citizen, but the assessment team identified them as journalists. It is not unlikely that more journalists are there among the complainants.

The assessment team randomly examined the status of complaints filed by the journalists to find whether and how they had used the information for reporting. Some of them filed multiple complaints. A total of 7 journalists were contacted who had filed a total of 29 complaints. Out of these, 16 stories were published while 10 others are in the process of reporting. Two complaints were resubmitted because the concerned authorities did not provide information even after IC's verdict. No report was produced against one complaint because it became redundant due to delay in receiving information.

Most of the information asked by the above 7 journalists related to suspicion about irregularities or corruptions in public fund management i.e. tender, land, projects, procurement etc.

Impact of Investigative Reports using the RTI Act

Reports using the RTI Act can unearth deeper information which reveals corruptions and irregularities that draws attention of the policy makers. Bangladesh's media environment

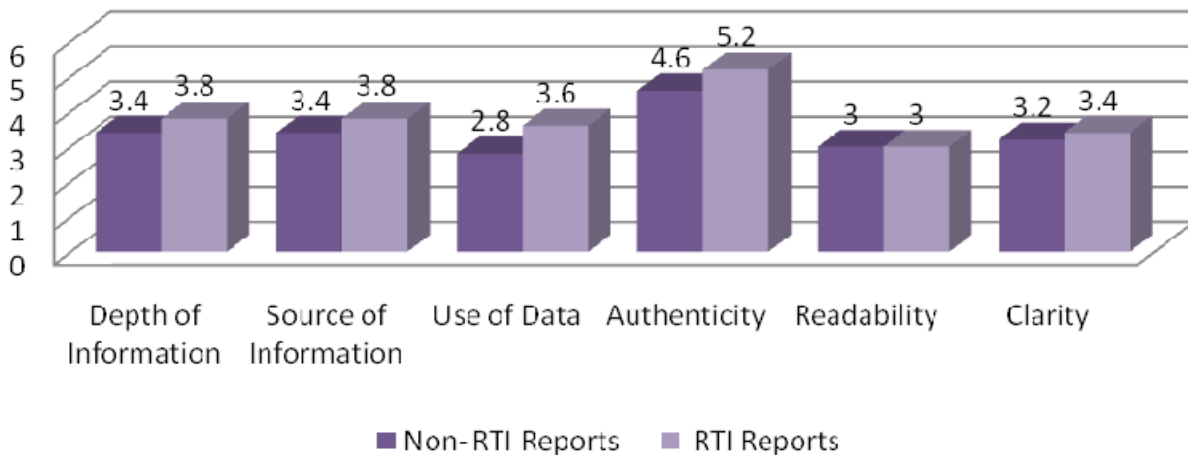
allows the reporters less opportunity to follow up whether their reports yielded any social impact. But there are instances that the public institutions took measures following the publication of media reports. Sometimes, the reporters unveil serious cases of irregularities using the RTI Act. But the respondents said corrective measures were unseen and often no measure was taken in most cases if politically influential people were involved in the scam. On the other hand, statutory bodies and relevant authorities have taken significant steps against the wrong doers using the information of the media report.

Impact of RTI Act on Report Quality

News content analysis have found that reports based on information collected through the RTI Act are rated high quality ones. Accuracy of information has been up to the mark when the facts are derived through the RTI Act confirming the authenticity.

Also the reporters who fail to use the RTI recognize the high value of the stories produced by their RTI-using colleagues. Gatekeepers opine that the RTI Act certainly helps quality journalism. The stories which are produced using the RTI Act get prominent coverage in the concerned media outlets.

Contents of a total of 10 special reports/news stories published in the national newspapers were analyzed. Of them , five reports were prepared based on information collected through traditional methods while the other five reports were prepared using information collected applying the RTI Act. The first group of stories was selected randomly, whereas, the reports prepared using the RTI Act were taken from MRDI archive.



Following a methodology developed by MRDI for content analysis, the stories were examined against six variables: 1) depth of information, 2) source of information, 3) use of data, 4) authenticity, 5) clarity and 6) readability. All the parameters were measured on a scale of 5 while the authenticity was analyzed on a scale of 6. This is important to note that, the news editors have greater responsibility than the reporters to ensure clarity and readability in journalism practice.

The analysis shows that the RTI-based stories scored slightly higher for all the indicators but scores are equal for the readability. The analysis indicates that stories using the RTI Act demonstrated more completeness and acceptability.

While examining the news stories, it was observed that some of the reports using the RTI Act were published in the inner pages (low treatment); but have elements and merit to secure placement in the front or back page. But since the concerned reporters (district correspondent) did not pursue sufficient field works or deeper investigation, the stories failed to get proper treatment. This indicates that the reporters based in districts do not have enough technical competencies to prepare investigative reports. Moreover, editing and mentoring for those reports have room for further improvements through training.

Support from Media Organization for Journalists

A very small number of media houses having special interest in the RTI Act provide support to the reporters throughout the process of information collection. These media houses encourage reporters with suggestions and guidance in the process of story planning for in-depth and investigative reporting using the RTI Act. Some of them also arrange orientation and training on the RTI Act for their reporters.

However, the common scenario is different where journalists use the RTI Act on their own without any direct support from the media houses. The media houses do not discourage or obstruct but they appeared to be reluctant. No initiative was seen to have taken by any media house for organized and selective use of the RTI

We need to offer institutional support to investigative reporter and that demands time, capacity development as well as resources.

--- says one panel discussants in Assessment findings seminar

Act. Often such efforts are not recognized by the house. As for example a reporter from a district filed application under the RTI Act to the Civil Surgeon office seeking copy of the latest audit observations and report which was not provided even by the appellate authority. He received the information after the verdict of the IC and came up with an in-depth story exposing corruption and irregularities. But unfortunately, the report remained unpublished apparently for lack of interest in newsroom. However, a community newspaper published the same story.

The professional associations of the journalists also seem to be “not supportive enough” and they are also “reluctant to improve the quality and capacity of the journalists.”

Benefits

The RTI Act is immensely useful when the issue is sensitive, and accessing information on such issue is difficult in a normal way. The use of the act ensures credibility and accuracy of the information. On many instances, the media house asks for supporting documents for information and the reporters use the RTI Act for that. The information journalists gather using conventional sources are sometimes superficial in nature and often unreliable. But the

RTI Act helps them dig out more. Sometimes, denial by sources throws the reporter into trouble for lack of supportive evidence, but the RTI Act provides reporter protection in such scenario, if challenged. The evidences also protect the reporter in the legal procedure. The reporter has a feeling of confidence while reporting with information received through official and legal channel instead of depending on leaked ones which may turn inaccurate.

Proactive Disclosure

The RTI Act and its uses by citizens as well as journalists have enabled a culture where the public offices are deliberately disclosing information. The proactive disclosure via websites and other platforms has increased since the implementation of the RTI Act and many documents are now available on websites which were hard to access before. But in terms of compliance, the progress of disclosure is not significant as outlined by the RTI activists, academics and journalists. The public offices are publishing information irregularly and often

Bureaucratic mindset is the only impediment on the part of the Government officials, which alone can change situation.

--- says one panel discussants in Assessment findings seminar

they are disorganized. Nevertheless, journalists scan information and look for news in them.

In many public offices, spokesperson or public relations wing lacks in necessary information that journalists seek and institutions should offer as part of their proactive disclosure. Against this backdrop, speakers at the national seminar proposed that all the Government offices should have specific and usable communication strategy which will help proactive disclosure.

Challenges Faced by Journalists in Using RTI Act

A major challenge the journalists face in the use of RTI is that it takes a long time to obtain the desired information. It may take 20 working days or even 30 working days if a third party is involved, which the journalist community find “not much helpful for them at all”. If the authorities deny providing information, the reporters may have to wait for the maximum of 210 days, which again does not guarantee that the reporter will get the information. Waiting for almost a year for information in Bangladesh’s media landscape is not entertained because

There is a culture of denying information which should be shunned through change in mindset.

--- says one panel discussants in Assessment findings seminar

the issue may lose its appeal by the time the information is available. In one instance, a journalist asked for information from one of the top constitutional offices under the RTI Act. The office contacted him informally and denied the information. Instead, he was offered an interview that he eventually accepted.

Using the act for day-to-day news coverage is not possible. In fact, Bangladesh's media industry has a trend to cover day events. However, if a reporter plans to do an in-depth or investigative report and the employers allow him/her ample time, the RTI Act can only be helpful. As a result, the RTI Act is not, so far, a preferred tool to most journalists. The act may cause strain in relationship between reporters and their official sources, which the reporters do not want. If the information which can easily be accessible by beat reporters from officials and still they opt to use the RTI, that may create a "psychological barrier" and such reporters often get cold shouldered by such officials and thus vital news sources can be damaged.

The RTI Act is yet to create impact in many places as one may ask for information to do an investigative report using the RTI Act, but the information received are often incomplete which frustrates the reporter. It killed my time and hampered my efforts.

--- says one Key-Informant

Due to lack of knowledge on the part of journalists on record keeping at the public offices, the information they ask quite often does not match with what is available in the public offices. This delays the process of making information available. Accessing required information still depends on authority's wish. Some reporters were "indirectly threatened or attempted to be influenced by other means" as they sought information from authorities regarding "sensitive issues". Often some officials use the act as a tool for delaying and ask journalists to apply through the RTI Act for simple information. Often the information providers create a gap while delivering information and they do not provide the whole or complete information, which frustrates the reporters and discourages them from pursuing the report.

Attitude of the government officials has been highlighted as a major challenge by the Information Commission itself. The officials want to offer information to journalists informally rather than using the RTI Act to avoid hassles. Some journalists also prefer that offer which saves time but compromise the full authenticity of the information.

Investigative reporting as a specialized area of journalism demands time, efforts and money which many of the media houses are often reluctant to allow. The houses have no useful data management and analysis system or any research wing for using the data collected through using the RTI Act. The reporters have got hardly any training opportunities for effectively using the act.

Another challenge for reporters is that sometimes they dig out sensitive information which conflicts with the business interest of the owner. The report is killed keeping the reporter in a vulnerable position as he gets identified in the community through filing the RTI application, which he could avoid by collecting information through traditional way.

Freedom of Press & RTI

Article 39 of the constitution of Bangladesh ensures citizens' freedom of thought and conscience, and of speech. It further adds 'Subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence, the right of every citizen of freedom of speech and expression; and freedom of the press, are guaranteed.'

The study found that the journalists face a lot of political and social pressure that causes self-censorship. Freedom of journalists is tied to business interest of the owners. Pattern of media ownership in Bangladesh allows less freedom for journalists to exercise freedom of expression, as observed by the study. The study noted that the media in Bangladesh may seem apparently free but direct and indirect control by the government is a much-talked-about issue. One of the major tools for the control has been advertisement. At the same time, hegemonic and discouraging socio-political elements restrict journalists to work freely, they observed. If a journalist is physically assaulted or accused of any legal allegation, support from the media owners or from media professionals' organizations is rarely seen. These factors discourage journalists to practice the optimum level of journalism. Section 57 of the recent ICT Act is also being discussed as a barrier for press freedom.

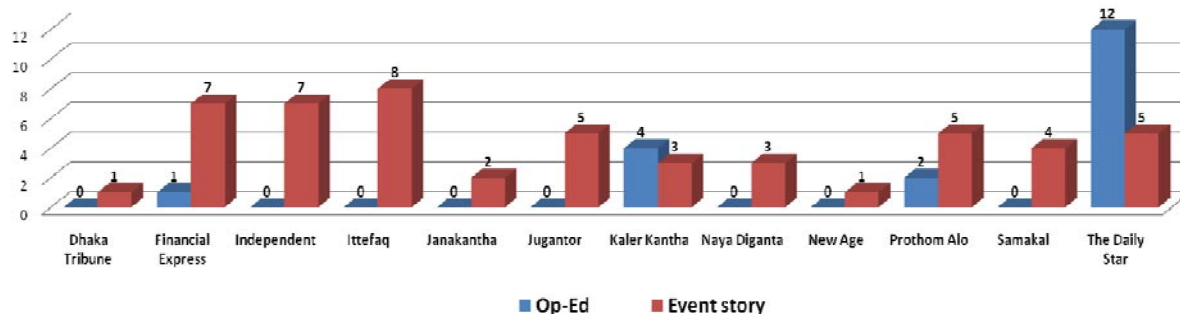
Role of Media in Promoting RTI

Bangladesh's media was highly vocal in support of the RTI Act before the law was enacted. But now the media is not that much vocal as expected in promoting the law and oversee how the law is being practiced and used by the citizens. Of all the laws available in Bangladesh, the RTI Act is the only one that allows the citizens to apply on the Government and other authorities. This reason should have been enough for the law to get more attention in terms of coverage in the media. Even the CIC was disappointed that despite his request to media for assigning reporters to cover the hearings of RTI complaints from which they would get news ideas for in-depth reporting, no positive response was there.

The assessment reviewed media coverage of RTI issues during the period July 2015 - June 2016 and found only 70 event stories and Op-Ed published in 10 national newspapers.

Misuse of the act

There is no doubt that the use of the RTI law is still very low in Bangladesh. However, there are quite an insignificant number of instances where the users attempted to use the law with



ulterior motive and the IC has swiftly taken note of such instances.

In some instances, journalists asked for information with vague questions which indicates that it has been asked to embarrass the offices or official concerned and not meant for journalism or reporting purposes.

Recommendations

As an advanced law compared to the socio-economic progress of the country, RTI Act has been facing obstacles in its implementation phase. It is taking time for the seekers and providers of information to shift from the culture of official secrecy to openness of information. However, as a part of the efforts for keeping the demand-supply chain of information operative and using RTI Act as a tool for qualitative and investigative reporting, the assessment brought out some recommendations applying its methodologies.

Media Houses

- Separate RTI wing can be set up in the media houses. Media can designate one news manager/decision maker for RTI Act related initiatives. Media can encourage the reporters to become self-motivated to use the act.
- Media houses and journalist associations have to take the issue of safety and security of journalists into serious account to promote freedom of press.
- In-house training of journalists for skill development on the RTI Act needs to be organized. Sub-editors and desk-in-charge also need to be trained. The capacity building initiatives of the media houses should cover the district and upazila-based reporters.
- Newspaper can allocate some space for publishing results of RTI Act complaints once in a month. Good examples can be highlighted.
- Since NGOs often have fear and conflict of interest, the media should use the act more frequently and lead the awareness campaign.

Information Commission

- The time for the procedure of providing information according to the RTI Act should be shortened.
- The Information Commission needs to work more on public awareness and nationwide campaign in partnership with media and CSOs to enhance visibility of IC with strong outreach activities.
- The IC also needs to be closer to the media with formal/informal interactions with editors and news room managers. IC should go for advocacy with media owners on RTI and introduce help desk to promote investigative journalism.
- IC should not give an impression that they are a typical directorate under the Information Ministry.
- The IC can introduce a separate award for the journalists for in-depth and investigative reporting using RTI Act. The IC can partner with other like-minded

organizations with respect to this. IC should have some mechanism to appreciate the media houses which publish/broadcast stories by using the act.

- Designated Officers of authorities need to be trained on the RTI Act and how to interact with journalists.
- IC requires disclosure of best practices as well as other experiences.
- IC annual report should be made available to the public.

Government

- The proactive disclosure needs to be improved following the provision and spirit of the RTI Act.
- Designated officers should work as the spokesperson and offer all the public information proactively.
- The websites of the public offices should be updated and made user friendly.
- Government should bring private sector institutions under the purview of RTI Act.

Activist organizations/NGOs

- Introducing data bank: organizations that are working on RTI Act can collect information from selective public offices and on newsworthy issues through using the act which they will publish on the website and inform the journalists.
- NGOs specialized in media capacity building should emphasize on how reporters can use RTI Act effectively for qualitative and in-depth reporting.
- Separate RTI help desk can be established for the correspondents and community newspaper reporters.
- Advocacy should be done with media owners to allocate some space for publishing results of RTI Act complaints once in a month. Good examples can be highlighted.

Way Forward

Against the backdrop of the discussions and findings of the study, it can be concluded that implementation of the RTI Act is much below the level of commitment made in its preamble. However, there is lack of research or analysis to understand its impact in empowering people and promoting good governance. It was suggested by the study that there should be a comprehensive research on how the RTI Act has been benefitting the greater population. There is no doubt that Bangladesh's media industry lacks in research-based journalism as the practice is yet to be flourished. For such journalism, the journalists must attain high standard of research skill and data analysis. The RTI can help investigative journalists to gather authentic information. But that is not all. They need to learn how to gather information, manage and analyse data and prepare report. During this assessment, senior gatekeepers of Bangladesh's media industry agreed to lend support to good journalism using the RTI Act. However, they have identified bureaucratic mindset of the public officials as the "most crucial stumbling block" in ensuring transparency and accountability which the RTI Act enables to overcome. Culture of proactive disclosure by the public and private offices is still a far cry where more attention is required by the stakeholders to improve the standard. Communication strategy for the IC needs to be implemented properly that will help media and benefit the people in numerous ways. It has been further demanded that the RTI Act should be applicable to private sector.