

Project Report, Year-1

1 November 2022 to 31 October 2023

Media Strengthening Democracy

Prepared by



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Context

Media, considered as the fourth pillar of a state, plays a vital role in creating an informed citizenry through ensuring continuous and free flow of information. According to a recent study, the news environment in Bangladesh has grown more complex over the past decade, undermining public trust in the news media and depriving the public of reliable information. As much as the Bangladeshi media is active in delivering breaking news, it is not as active in producing quality reports. The credibility and trust of readers/viewers in the media can be effectively restored by in-depth reporting on important issues of public interest.

Quality journalism faces several challenges, including a lack of professionalism, self-imposed censorship, and barriers to information availability, but there are also examples of some excellent journalism too. Keeping this in mind, broader media distribution of in-depth analysis, constructive criticism, and public interest reporting is required, with an emphasis on high-quality journalism.

The project "Media Supporting Democracy" has been developed with a consideration to this context as a background. The project's primary goal is to strengthen the role of the media by improving journalists' abilities to report on topics of public interest and raising their knowledge of digital security.

Project Objective

To strengthen role of news outlets through capacity building of journalists on public interest reporting and create awareness on digital safety.



Activity performed

Activity-1: Media monitoring of public interest stories for training content development

A 12-month news content monitoring has been conducted. Content of the public interest stories published over 3 TV channels and 3 newspapers in 12 months spread over a span of previous three years 2020, 2021 and 2022 have been monitored. A total of 839 public interest stories from print media and 399 from TV media have been identified for further review.

Main objective of this activity is to analysis the quality of the published reports to find the gaps that indicates areas of knowledge and skills journalists need to improve to regain trust of audience through quality reporting on issues of public interest.

A senior journalist and subject matter specialist oversaw this monitoring. Under the expert's direction, two media monitoring officers under this project conducted the monitoring.

The following findings were drawn from the media monitoring:

- Editorials or opinion columns scarcely address matters of public interest.
- The insignificant number of follow-up reports imply that public interest stories could be largely seen as one-off issues by news media and not diligently pursued to induce a positive change.
- Spot news and in-depth reports vastly outnumbering follow-up articles suggest that TV media treats the issues as passing attempts to draw audience, not to induce change.
- The limited space allocated, along with the pages the stories were assigned to and the special treatment accorded, seem to suggest that newspapers may not be assessing reports in public interest to be sufficiently significant to warrant eye-catching production.
- With most stories aired early during the bulletins in packages, it can be surmised that producers want to retain the audience attention with eye-catching elements.

Following the findings of content analysis, the subject matter specialist drafted a preliminary training content including name of potential sessions and the subjects to be covered in upcoming in-house training programmes aimed to enhance journalists' understanding of public interest stories and to motivate them to go deeper into matters related to governance and accountability.

Activity-2: Training content and session finalization meeting

MRDI convened a training content development meeting to finalise session plan of in-house training on public interest journalism and accountability tools and finalise potential resource persons for the upcoming training session. Gatekeepers from five news outlets attended the meeting held at the MRDI conference room.

Based on the results of the news content monitoring, the issue expert presented the draft training content and session plan during the meeting. He also presented a summary on finding of the news content analysis that reflected current trend of publication of public interest stories in the selected news outlets.



Gatekeepers gave their valuable input to finalize the training content. They also proposed name of potential resource persons for conducting different sessions in the training.

During the discussion, they highlighted weaknesses such as low compensation, lack of proper supervision, and a lack of quality training for skill enhancement. The issue of gatekeepers

handling content from outside the capital facing excessive workloads also came into discussion. Unless a major incident occurs in the districts, the central desk tends to neglect content from outside Dhaka. As a result, content from areas other than Dhaka often lacks priority, whether it's being printed by newspapers or broadcasted by television channels.

Activity-3: Analysing trend of publishing reports through monitoring media contents

A media monitoring is currently underway to analyze the trends of published reports on politics, democracy, and election covering 7 TV channels, 7 newspapers, and 2 online portals. The analysis mainly focuses on the news coverage in the regular pages of the newspaper, prime-time news of TV channels, and online items posted at 9:30 am, 1:30 pm, 4:30 pm.

The trend analyses began in May 2023 and will continue till April 2024. The results of this analysis will be used for designing a comprehensive capacity-building program for journalists in the future.

A meeting was organized to finalize the methodology of the monitoring. Eight participants including an issue expert, gatekeepers from news outlets and representative from Civil Society Organisation were present in the meeting.

Activity-4: In-house Training on Public Interest Journalism and Accountability Tools

The primary goal of this activity was to strengthen the skills and capabilities of district correspondents in bringing attention to local-level public interest issues through production of quality stories. Nine in-house trainings on 'Public Interest Journalism and Accountability Tools' have been organized for 5 newspapers and 4 TV channels.



Participants

In each training session, 17 district correspondents and 3 sub-editor/newsroom editor from the Dhaka office responsible for managing copies from district correspondents were selected and nominated by their respective news outlets. A total of 180 participants reached through 9 in-house training.

Sessions and resource persons

During the training, participants were introduced to the concept of public interest in journalism. They gained insights on the distinction between public preference and public interest, and conceptualizing key elements that can elevate a story into a public interest one. Techniques for generating story ideas were explored, and strategies for transforming small ideas into impactful stories were discussed.

The training also covered the topic of public procurement at the local level, focusing on different stages and management of the process. Emphasis was placed on the importance of specific documents for reporters and where to access these documents.

Participants came to know about the basics of the Right to Information (RTI) Act and its significance in public interest reporting. Ethical considerations throughout the reporting process, as well as the role of holding authorities accountable in public interest reporting, were highlighted.

Government officials, issue experts, and senior journalists conducted the training sessions, providing valuable insights and knowledge. As part of the training, participants developed their story ideas and submitted them to their respective news outlets for mentorship support.

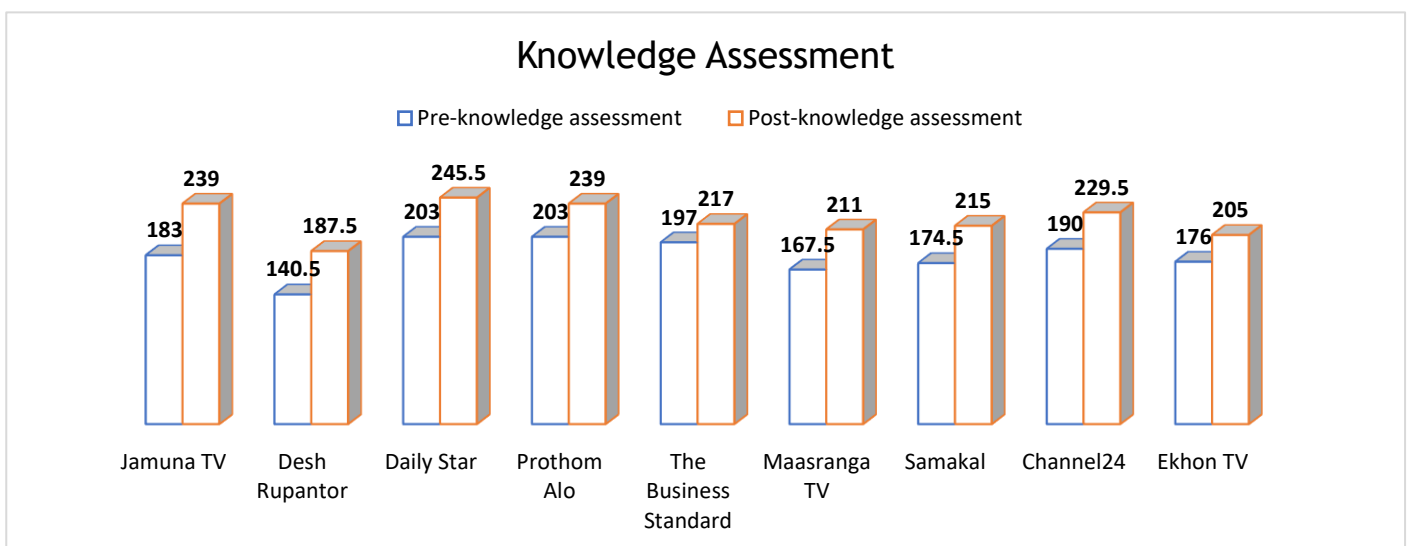
Editors/chief editors/senior management of the news outlets were present in the inauguration and closing session, also as the facilitator of the trainings.

Session method

Exercises, lectures, and multimedia presentations were used to conduct the training. Question-and-answer sessions, group discussions and hands-on activities were applied to make the sessions participatory and interesting. Pre and post training knowledge assessment and the training evaluation made the outcome and quality of the training visible.

Knowledge assessment

Knowledge assessment was conducted with the training participants before and after the training session using the same set of questionnaire. The assessment questionnaire was

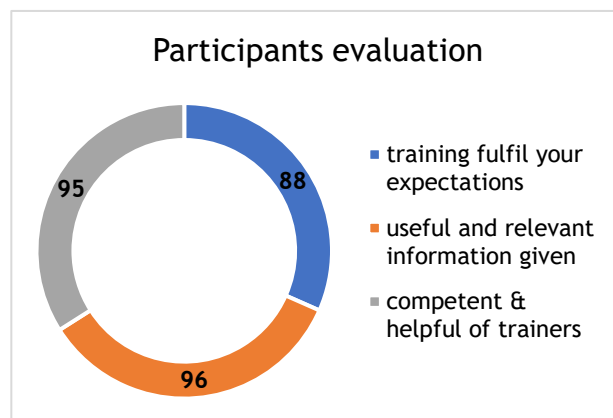


developed based on the issues to be discussed in the sessions. The assessment result shows significant improvement of knowledge on the topics discussed.

Evaluation and observation

The training program was well-received by the participants, with 88% agreement that it fulfilled expectations. 96% of them agreed that the training provided useful and relevant information. Additionally, the trainers were praised for their competence and helpfulness by 95% of the participants.

After comprehensive discussions in the training, participants planned to bring changes in their reporting. They recognized the very important role of training in transforming and developing their working skills and knowledge. They are now more confident to produce quality reports on public interest using learnings from the training.



In the evaluation form used, participants mentioned different aspects & tactics of in-depth reporting, source mapping, interview techniques, generating story idea, ethics & gender inclusion in stories and data collection from field as learning from the trainings.



As a follow-up to the training, participants recommended organizing longer-duration follow-up sessions. They also suggested monitoring of the public interest stories published by the participants in post-training period.

Activity-5: Award mentorship on public interest reporting

As part of long-term capacity building approach, mentorship on public interest reporting has been awarded to 81 selected district correspondents who took part in 2-day in-house training on public interest journalism and accountability tools organized earlier with 9 news outlets. Based on the story ideas developed during the training programme, each news outlets selected 9 district correspondents for this mentorship.

It's a learning by doing process for the selected district correspondents to utilize their knowledge gained through the in-house training to produce quality public interest stories. In this process, mentees are working on their story ideas under supervision and guidance of mentors selected by the news outlets.

Total 49 mentorships have been completed resulting in the publication or on-air of 56 stories addressing various public interest concerns at the district level. Another 20 mentees submitted their stories to their news outlet requesting review and publication.

Activity-6: Engagement with Newsroom

A meeting was organized at the MRDI office with newsroom managers to discuss ways in which public interest stories can attract media audience, enhance trust in media, and ultimately contribute to the sustainability of news outlets. News managers of 8 news outlets, where in-house training on public interest journalism and accountability tool were organized, participated in the meeting.

The interaction highlighted absence of required capacity building initiatives for both national and district level reporters as a significant factor contributing to the limited number of public interest stories in the news media. In most cases, journalists lack updated knowledge on journalism tools and technique which hinders their ability to produce objective, ethical and quality reports.



Limited financial support of the news outlets is another challenge in preparing in-depth reports. During the interaction, newsroom managers engaged in discussions about their current situation and put forth suggestions for potential future initiatives aimed to facilitate production of quality stories by the district correspondents.

The newsroom managers also reached a consensus on the idea of collaborating collectively to pursue their common interests.