

Safety and Security Concerns of Journalists during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused increased safety and security challenges for journalists around the globe. However, in many developing nations, like Bangladesh, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding these adverse consequences of the journalism profession. This study intends to explore the safety and security issues faced by journalists in covering the COVID-19 pandemic for major newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and news portals. A total of sixty In-depth interviews (IDIs) using a semi-structured interview questionnaire and two Focus group discussions were conducted among journalists in person interview questionnaire and two Focus group discussions were conducted among journalists in-person in sixteen districts under two divisions of Bangladesh. The data were audio taped, transcribed, and later analysed utilizing the hierarchy of influence model. The study revealed four major dimensions of journalists such as physical, psychological, digital, and financial safety concerns. The data showed that most journalists faced financial hardship and mental distress due to a lack of regular salary, health insurance, and fear of infection and prosecution under the Digital Security Act for news reporting. They also suffered from obtaining safety equipment such as personal safety equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer and facemasks. The data indicate that, several safety and security challenges impacted news coverage and the overall state of journalism in Bangladesh during COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, safety and security, journalists, Bangladesh*

Safety and Security of Journalists amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

Safety and security issues have long been a topic of discussion among researchers and practitioners of journalism. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the issue of how journalists can serve their important role of providing the public with reliable information in times of crisis, with a significant risk to their own lives and health. The information that the reporters were reporting could save people's lives by telling them where infections were happening, which hospitals and clinics were coping, and which were overwhelmed by cases. State lockdowns especially hampered print publications, which interrupted or stopped their production and distribution for long periods. This brought even more people to the internet, which was often now their only source of information.

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Journalists did not rely solely on digital platforms to fulfil their professional responsibilities. Even as much of the world remained under lockdown, they continued to work in the field to gather news and provide timely information to the public. In this context, at least 400 journalists died from COVID-19 from the beginning of 2020 to September 2020 in 50 different nations around the world including Bangladesh (Press Emblem Campaign, 2020). In Bangladesh, 25 journalists died from COVID-19 and around 750 journalists and media professionals from 162 national and local media outlets became infected with the coronavirus while working as front-line reporters (Swapan, 2020). A total of 76 per cent of Bangladeshi journalists worked through the COVID-19 pandemic without health insurance (South Asia Center for Media in Development, 2020) and 33 per cent of them were forced to work without personal protective equipment (PPE) (Bangla Tribune, 2020). As a result of inadequate security, 21 journalists died from suspected COVID-19 infection (Uddin and Rigby, 2020). Ahmed (2020) notes challenges to press freedom during the pandemic for covering corruption and criticizing powerful politicians. Reporters Without Borders called for the dismissal of charges against at least 12 bloggers and journalists who were detained under the Digital Security Act of 2018 after covering COVID-19 related issues (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Print media declined as a source of news throughout the world for a generation (Jain, 2022). Yet, in Bangladesh, especially among the millions of poor and rural people who do not have internet access, print media was still a vibrant source of news in 2019. However, in 2020-2021, the print media were hit hardest by the state's response to COVID-19. Lockdowns, curfews, and restrictions on movement made it almost impossible to print and distribute newspapers and magazines. In addition, misconceptions about the causes of the spread of this virus, in social media (Ahmed, 2020), made some newspaper readers afraid to go around in the street looking for – some even to touch - a newspaper. According to Khan (2020), there was a 50–70 per cent decline in Dhaka-based newspapers' circulation and a significant decline in revenue due to loss of advertising (their main source of income). Businesses that were locked down most of the time had no reason and no money to advertise their products. These economic shocks forced numerous print media news companies to close their doors.

Some 68 out of a total of 340 newspapers being published in 2019, in eight Divisional cities and other Districts of the country, have ceased publication (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). Additionally, the economic crisis in print media in Bangladesh cost the country 1,600 journalist's jobs, and over 4,000 journalists suffered financial losses in various ways throughout the pandemic crisis (Antara, 2020). Antara (2020) described getting correct information while maintaining safety and security for journalists during the pandemic as a "huge difficulty": she thought it was possible that many print media journalists would leave the industry.

Usually, there is no unemployment benefit scheme in Bangladesh. However, the Government of Bangladesh, recognizing the crisis in the industry and the need for professional journalism during the pandemic, granted 10,000 BDT (approximately \$100 US) to each journalist who had been out of work for at least six months during the pandemic (Jahangir, 2020).

These economic issues for journalists have largely been neglected in the

published literature. Yet, very basic changes occurred in Bangladesh's news industry and in the concept of a career in journalism in 2021. This article seeks to help fill this gap in the literature.

Rangpur and Rajshahi Divisions, in the poorest northern part of Bangladesh, were selected as the site for data collection. This largely rural area probably typifies most of Bangladesh's land area in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on journalism. Big cities, like Dhaka and Chittagong, were a different story.

The Gap in the Literature on COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Journalism and Journalists in Bangladesh outside Dhaka

Although researchers have begun gathering information on the various challenges confronting the media industry in the modern world, the majority of research on journalists' safety focuses on reporting on conflict and war (Ashry, 2019; Kim, 2010; Tumber, 2006) with relatively few academics writing about it. The issue there was mostly physical danger to journalists operating in combat zones.

Journalists' occupational safety comprises personal (physical, psychological) and infrastructural (digital, financial) dimensions for performing professional duties (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). They conceptualize journalists' safety as the extent to which journalists can perform their work-related tasks without facing threats to their physical, psychological, digital, and financial stability and well-being. In addition, Brambila and Hughes (2019) characterize journalist safety as the set of behaviors and circumstances that lessen the possibility of harm to them as individuals and as institutional actors—that is, physical, psychological, digital, and financial. Physical threats also include beatings, torture, sexual harassment, arrests, imprisonment, disappearances, and murder.

Digital threats include hacking and surveillance attacks and limiting or blocking access to information, sources, and audiences. Unstable work conditions put journalists' wages uncertain and make it harder for them to fulfil their obligations (Hayes and Silke, 2019). This condition challenges the operational basis of journalism as an institution. On the individual level, uncertainty manifests in unemployment, the loss of income or position, professional standing, and reputation- or in a less well-equipped journalistic culture, it characterizes work conditions that had never been financially stable (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020). Moreover, digital, physical, and financial safety are clearly interlinked with psychological consequences which can be treated as key indicators towards this profession. Concern over the financial instability of the journalists' profession has grown because of dysfunctional media markets, political entanglements, and advertisement cuts. Journalists' safety affects not just only the profession and individual journalists, but also democracy, societies overall, and freedom of expression (Hoiby and Ottosen, 2019).

International Federation of Journalists (2020) identified several significant global issues for journalists, including financial, psychological, and physical challenges. Meanwhile, Jamil & Appiah-Adjei (2020) also demonstrated that during the COVID-19 outbreak, the media mostly spread misinformation and deception since Pakistani journalists lacked strong gatekeeping and verification mechanisms. These challenges

included physical assault, arrest, confinement, censorship, and harassment. Likewise, besides health safety concerns, unstable financial conditions and threats by the ruling party and the government during the pandemic were considered in different articles about the journalists working in the capital city of Bangladesh.

Yet even on this general issue of journalists' safety in hostile environments, there has been little attention to the plight of journalists in Bangladesh. Khatun et al. (2017) are one of the few exceptions to this dearth of study of Bangladesh on journalists' physical safety, addressing the reasons for self-censorship by Bangladeshi journalists. Kaioum and Panday (2012) and others were also exceptions, identifying a number of types of discrimination against journalists working outside of Dhaka (of the kind sampled for this research), including low pay, a lack of training and motivation and negligence on the part of media managers. So the journalists interviewed for this research come from a long history of marginalisation and discrimination, to which the COVID-19 pandemic merely added more burden. Islam and Mahadi (2025) identify political, digital, and socio-cultural threats that Bangladeshi journalists regularly encounter.

Much of this work pre-dates COVID-19 and, while important, with those issues likely to remain with us long after the pandemic, they are not directly relevant to the impact of the pandemic. There were some concerns and challenges of journalists covering natural disasters, which are more relevant to the COVID-19 experience. Ananthan (2017) discovered that journalists in Sri Lanka suffered bodily and psychological harm as a result of losing their jobs during the tsunami there. During the Ebola pandemic in Africa, from 2013 to 2016, journalists suffered greatly from a lack of safety equipment and financial stability in Liberia (Thomas & Senkpeni, 2020; Edimo, 2016), but not in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Antwi-Boasiako, 2017). The importance of press freedom was emphasised during the avian influenza and other earlier pandemics in Australia (Hooker, et al., 2011). Earliest, Raj et al. (2010) researched safety concerns for reporters covering natural disasters in Bangladesh.

Academic research into the COVID-19 pandemic's impact in Bangladesh seems mostly limited to a few Bangladeshi sources. South Asia Center for Media and Development (2020)¹ and Islam et al. (2020)² raised the issue of safety concerns for Dhaka journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic. They did not explore the impact of the pandemic in rural areas as is done here.

Theoretical Framework

Since journalism is so important to society, journalists work in an ecosystem where their work both influences and is influenced by surrounding circumstances (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). McQuail (2000) and Preston (2009) developed a theoretical and conceptual framework that serves as a basis for researching the

¹South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID) explored the huge gaps between expectations and reality among mostly-Dhaka-based journalists during the COVID-19 lockdown.

²Islam addressed safety issues for Dhaka-based newsroom editors and sub-editors and reported that media outlets were taking action to protect their physical and economical safety, such as providing masks, PPE, hand sanitizers and transport support during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

factors that influence and mould news content and journalism practice. Nonetheless, Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model is among the most well-liked theoretical models. It provides enhanced explanatory power along with a framework for examining the combined effects of multiple components at various levels on journalistic activities.

It outlines the factors that influence media production and arranges them along a spectrum that spans from small-scale societal systems to the levels of individual microbes.

The model illustrates how several levels of influence may interact with one another. The stages in the continuum are individual, media routines, organisational, social institutional, and social system levels (Reese, 2019). The backgrounds, attitudes, personalities, and professional orientations of journalists are believed to impact the individual level of influence, which is the most micro level on the continuum. This, in turn, impacts the media content that journalists produce (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

The social institutional level focuses on how the environment, sources, social institutions, etc., shape journalists' work, while the social system level, which is the most macro-level, discusses how ideologies and the complex system in which journalists operate can influence journalists' work (Reese, 2019).

The hierarchy of influences model is different from previous models in that it takes into account micro, meso, and macro levels. The model highlights institutional environment (i.e., political, socio-cultural, and regulatory contexts), social system, and individual impacts on journalistic practice at the macro level, as well as organisational influences at the meso level.

The model has been applied in journalism studies to examine several communication concepts across the five levels of analysis suggested by Vos and Heinderycks (2015), including professionalism and gatekeeping. However, studies have not addressed how the model explains the concept of journalists' safety and the variables that affect it at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Because it enables the researchers to investigate the factors influencing safety issues journalists face while performing their journalistic tasks in the proper micro, meso, and macro levels in the Bangladesh context, the hierarchy of influences model, thus, serves as the foundation for this study.

Methodology

The study was qualitative supplemented by quantitative data. A total of 60 journalists from newspapers, online news portals, television channels, mainstream radio stations, and community radio stations, from 16 Districts in Northern Bangladesh (Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions), who covered COVID-19-related news in various media, were interviewed³. A minimum of five years of experience with a mainstream media outlet was used as the primary respondent selection criterion. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed in Bengali, and data from journalists in person were collected in 2022. Due to time constraints and to reduce

³There are a total of 64 districts in Bangladesh.

the possibility of COVID-19 infections among respondents and data collectors, the study was conducted in the immediate post-COVID-19 period. The research team identified 70 journalists from 16 Districts, contacted them, and 65 responded. Five questionnaires were excluded from 65 due to a lack of qualitative data.

In addition, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in two divisional cities separately with sixteen journalists. Two criteria were applied when selecting respondents for FGDs: one journalist was selected from each district of the division, and participants were selected from diverse media outlets such as Dhaka-based newspapers, local newspapers, news agencies, television channels, and radio stations.

Before the interview began, the respondents were made aware of the research objectives, potential risks and benefits of their voluntary participation and their informed consents were obtained. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English. The full identities of the participants in data collection were kept confidential to protect them from retaliation by any person or organization for data they disclosed or opinions they expressed. The project was exempted from review by the Ethics Review Committee of the researchers' university as it was not related to critical issues such as medicine, health, or children. However, the researchers voluntarily chose to maintain the highest ethical standards in this research, for example, by keeping respondents' identities confidential despite their consent to disclosure of their identities and by getting full, voluntary informed consent from each participant to participate. Each participant was informed of the right to terminate participation at any time without cause.

Moreover, to ensure authenticity and quality of the data, the interview documents and FGD transcripts were sent to the interviewees, via email, to reconfirm their statements. The researchers finalised the study's findings only after receiving approval from the journalists participating.

The acquired data were examined thematically by the researchers, who also coded the data and transcripts numerically to protect research participants' anonymity by de-identifying them.

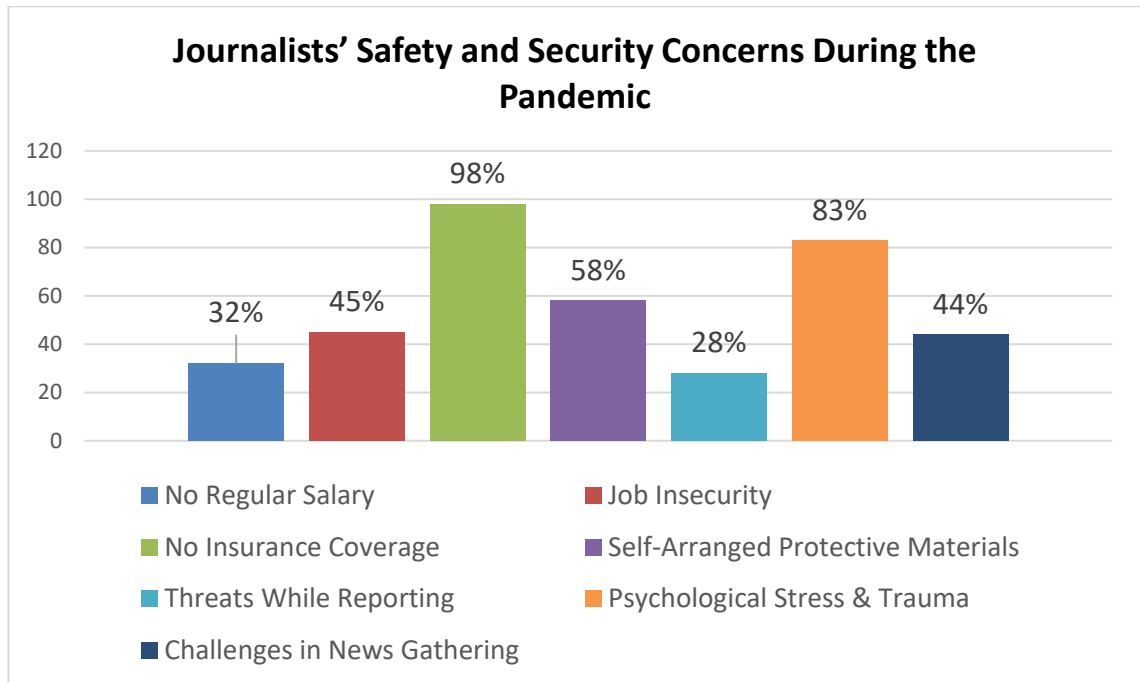
Findings and Discussion

The findings from the interview and FGDs are presented in two clusters. The first step focuses on the sufficiency of the journalist's safety and security, while the second step focuses on challenges to their safety and security, to understand what needs to be done to improve their safety and security

Identifying the Safety and Security of Journalists in covering the COVID-19 Pandemic

The data show that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists faced various types of insecurity, including a lack of job security, health issues, the unavailability of personal protective equipment, personal threats, and mental health issues.

Figure 1. Percentage of Journalists Experiencing Safety and Security Issues Amid the COVID-19 Crisis



Note: Author's interview data, 2022

Most journalists were worried about the lack of insurance coverage (99%) and the need to collect their own protective materials (77%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A smaller portion reported not receiving regular salaries (32%) or expressed fear of losing their jobs (30%).

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings on Journalists' Safety and Security Concerns during COVID-19

Safety and Security Concern	Frequency (%)	Description/Theme
No Regular Salary	32%	A significant portion of journalists experienced unstable or inconsistent income during the pandemic.
Job Insecurity	45%	Nearly half faced uncertainty about employment status due to industry instability.
No Insurance Coverage	98%	An overwhelming majority lacked health or risk insurance, highlighting extreme institutional vulnerability.
Self-Arranged Protective Materials	58%	More than half had to procure their own safety gear (e.g., masks, PPE), indicating inadequate organizational support.
Threats While Reporting	28%	Journalists continued to face direct threats in the field despite mobility and safety restrictions.

Safety and Security Concern	Frequency (%)	Description/Theme
Psychological Stress & Trauma	83%	High levels of emotional and psychological distress were reported, reflecting the mental health toll of pandemic journalism.
Challenges in News Gathering	44%	Difficulties obtaining information, accessing sources, and verifying facts were common barriers during the pandemic.

Note: Author's interview data, 2022

Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of the primary themes identified in the study. The discussion that follows provides a detailed examination of each theme and its significance within the broader context of journalists' safety and security.

Lack of Job Security and Unreliable Remuneration

Most journalists, 58 per cent of the interview respondents, were on salary, meaning that they received regular payment (whether or not it was fixed and whether or not they called it an "honorarium"). However, 32 per cent of the workforce said that they received payment irregularly. Another 10 per cent of journalists did not answer the question about their payment. One of the journalists said:

We, the journalists outside of Dhaka, got a lump sum honorarium instead of salary. I am always scared: not only of not being paid but also of losing this job altogether. During the pandemic, the most frightening situation for some of us was the anxiety that we could, any day, be told that we did not need to come back again (Interviewee number 13).

The data reveal that 55 per cent of the journalists were not afraid of losing their jobs during the pandemic crisis. That the majority felt job secure is certainly good. But that 45 per cent of the journalists felt that they might lose their jobs at any time is not good enough.

Two reasons may explain the slightly higher employment security and a little more remuneration insecurity for journalists, especially outside Dhaka, during the pandemic crisis. Usually, the mainstream print and online media employ only one reporter in a District, while television companies employ one reporter and one cameraperson for a District. The reporter is solely responsible for covering all newsworthy issues for his/her employer(s) in a given district. Thus, the employers tend a little more toward job security because dismissing the single reporter for a District means no news to report from that District, no matter how important the story. They can lose out to competitors in covering news there and that can also translate into less readers, viewers, and advertisers paying them revenue in that District.

Reporters outside Dhaka have historically been poorly paid and are usually employed informally, without the appointment letter and contract required by the

Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and its attendant rights for the worker (Panday & Rahman, 2011), such as the right not to be dismissed without cause, the right to minimum wages and the right to fixed compensation paid regularly. If the company dismisses an informal employee, does not pay the employee or reduces the employee's payment, the informal employee has no recourse, as there is no proof of employment and no signed contract. This is one reason that the payment is often called "honorarium" rather than "salary", which implies an employment relation with legal obligations on the employer and legal rights for the worker. Worse, on top of this background of underpayment and no security of employment or payment, the lockdown suddenly deprived advertisers of much of their own revenue, as they were not allowed to carry on their business, so they could not pay for media advertising, a major source of revenue for the media. Then the lockdown also suddenly deprived many readers/viewers of their jobs or at least part of their income: they might choose food or other necessities rather than to buy access to news. So many media companies employing journalists suddenly lost large chunks of their revenue due to the lockdown and were literally paying all their creditors, including employees, only whatever they could with whatever they had. Journalists in rural areas kept their jobs but their income became irregular, delayed and was often short compared to past agreements and practice.

A distortion in the data set must be acknowledged. The criterion for selecting participants "five years of experience and employment by at least one mainstream media outlet" means that the best-paid and most-secure journalists, working with media outlets that dominate the industry and also have other complementary lines of business revenue, were most likely to have been selected to supply data. Many journalists, new to the industry, freelancing or working for newer and smaller media employers in the small towns and rural areas, with smaller revenue bases, were excluded from the sample set. According to the Department of Films and Publications (DFP), in 2019, there were 340 daily newspapers in Bangladesh (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). Due to the coronavirus pandemic, only 86 were in business in 2020. Almost 1,000 journalists became unemployed when these newspapers shut down (Asia News, 2020). The reputed German media company, *Deutsche Welle* (DW), published a report on the salaries and jobs of Bangladeshi journalists during the pandemic, finding that at least 4,000 journalists and media workers in Bangladesh were adversely financially affected by the pandemic. Of these, at least 600 journalists were dismissed or stood down (Swapan, 2020). All of this suggests that the data reported in this study might have come from a group who were more job secure and remuneration secure than most reporters in the industry. This would have tended to skew the data toward a far rosier picture than existed throughout the industry and throughout the country. Caution must therefore be taken in drawing conclusions from this data about "all journalists in Bangladesh during the coronavirus pandemic."

Despite the irregular honoraria and lower pay, reporters in the sample set still wanted to stay in their jobs. This was due to the uncertainty of finding other jobs and their understanding that the number and profits of potential employers, in journalism and all industry, was sharply declining during the COVID-19 pandemic. A journalist, from the part of the news industry worst affected by the pandemic (the print media), stated:

I cannot blame the media for paying their employees irregular honoraria during the pandemic. The entire media industry suffered from a lack of advertisements, circulation, and proper government support during the crisis (Interviewee number 09).

This journalist's statement exemplifies the feelings of most journalists outside Dhaka who contributed data for this research. Even normally well-paid and employment-secure journalists in Dhaka often did not receive regular payment for their work during the crisis. Some journalists employed by media houses in Dhaka were forced to diversify, reporting in local newspapers, national newspapers, online, radio and television channels, etc. to patch together enough money to support their families. Some journalists outside Dhaka had to supplement their professional income with other forms of livelihood from business or employment in other industries in order to survive. Furthermore, the data collected for this research shows that the majority of respondents did experience financial insecurity due to a lack of proper support from the Government, media outlets, and journalists' organizations, much like Liberian journalists in dealing with the Ebola pandemic earlier (Thomas and Senkpeni, 2020; Edimo, 2016). However, the majority of Bangladeshi respondents in this research did not experience unemployment to the extent that Sri Lankan journalists did during natural disasters such as the great tsunami of 2004 (Ananthan, 2017).

Lack of Health Protection

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the IFJ issued a safety advisory to media professionals and advised media employers to treat the corona outbreak as a health and safety crisis, so that employees could perform their duties with due care and protection from infection (International Federation of Journalists, 2020). The COVID-19 News Organizations Safety Protocols provide practical guidance on how to cover the pandemic professionally while minimising risks. These Protocols addressed assignment safety, hygiene, and mental health concerns, such as managing freelancer accreditation, PPE, health insurance, and expenses for mental health safety (International Media Support, 2020).

A total of 98 per cent of respondents to this research project said that they had been denied health insurance, preventing them from claiming expenses for medical treatment and their families from claiming compensation for death. One reporter, from a leading TV channel in Chapai Nawabganj, described the personal meaning of this statistic:

One of my close friends, who worked in the Daily Kaler Kantha (a newspaper) in my District, died in a road accident while on duty. He did not receive adequate medical care or compensation. His family has also received no benefit or compensation from the media, journalist organizations, or from the newspaper owners (Interviewee number 18).

Rural journalists often cannot access good medical care even during normal times and, due to the sudden overload of coronavirus cases, medical care in many

rural Districts virtually collapsed. For example, the news editor of a leading Rajshahi-based local newspaper died of COVID-19.

Of the respondents, only 2 per cent of the journalists in the sample for this research reported that they had signed a health insurance policy and submitted it as requested by media employers. Health insurance is far from comprehensive in Bangladesh. There is no State scheme: the state hospitals are supposedly “free” but there are charges for seeing a doctor’s visit as an outpatient, day-fees for inpatients, and fees for medicine and tests that can add 31 up to be substantial.

The “free” State hospitals become expensive because they often run out of medicines or lack needed testing equipment. In this case, patients are told “go get this medicine” or “go bring these test results”. What that means is that the patient has to pay market prices to buy medicines at pharmacies or undergo tests in private clinics at their own expense.

During the pandemic, many patients rushed to suddenly overcrowded state facilities, full of COVID-19 patients, and were simply turned away. There were sad stories in the media about patients in Joypurhat District being turned away, trying for Naogaon District hospital, being turned away there and dying on the trip to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, which became a treatment centre of last resort for the whole Division. This was not a matter of money, it was a matter of capacity: but those with health insurance could have availed of the private sector hospitals, which had great capacity (some of it nationalised by the Government during the pandemic).

Private health insurance through employers is relatively new in Bangladesh. Some universities and some private companies, especially in Dhaka, have offered cover to their employees through private schemes (The Daily Star, 2021). A journalists’ cooperative, Dhaka Reporters’ Unity (DRU), provides its members in Dhaka health insurance cover and, during the pandemic, provided a COVID-19 testing booth in Dhaka, for Dhaka-based journalists. The Broadcast Journalist Centre (BJC) offered health insurance but only to Dhaka-based television journalists, as well as ambulance services to COVID-19 positive journalists (Broadcast Journalist Centre, 2020).

Yet, capital-based journalist organizations namely Dhaka Reporters Unity and Broadcast Journalist Center membership and services are confined among Dhaka city journalists while the present study was conducted among outside Dhaka journalists. No organization or institution provides such benefits to journalists working outside of Dhaka (Dhaka Reporters Unity, n.d.). In general, access to emergency coronavirus treatment was better, although certainly not good, in Dhaka.

Personal health insurance, except for rich people and foreigners, is virtually unheard of in Bangladesh. A major source of health care during normal times in Bangladesh, for those who can afford it, is to travel to the neighbouring country, India, or sometimes even as far as Thailand, and pay cash. But the Indians sealed the border in 2020, as did Bangladesh in reply and as did most countries in the world. Few journalists have the money to get treatment in India or Thailand anyway, even during normal times.

The results here confirm the findings of the media-related organization SACMID, which discovered that 76 per cent of journalists lacked health insurance during the pandemic (SACMID, 2020). SACMID (2020) sampled journalists in Dhaka, where

access to health insurance (e.g., by the Dhaka Reporters' Unity or other Broadcast Journalist Centre, described above) is marginally better than for journalists in rural areas, from which the sample for this research was taken. Thus, the SACMID (2020) result is marginally better than the finding of this study.

A great worry for many journalists interviewed for this research, in particular, was that they would carry coronavirus home to their family members. A District-level reporter for a major television channel stated:

We are forced to live in a small, rented house, with other family members, due to my small honorarium. As a result of my frequent visits to gather news, I go to many places and meet many people. That means I am highly-likely to get infected with coronavirus. We can also pick up the virus from colleagues. So I am highly-likely to get infected with coronavirus and then to get everyone in my house infected quickly (Interviewee number 21).

According to the IFJ (2020) and SACMID (2020) studies, there were many cases of journalists infecting their families with coronavirus as this respondent feared.

Managing PPEs as part of Health Security

PPE refers to protective clothing, helmets, goggles, masks, or other garments or equipment that protect the wearer's body from viral intrusion. However, the data here shows that 98 per cent of journalists used only the face mask to protect themselves from COVID-19. The journalists reported that 95 per cent of them used only hand sanitizer. Only a very small number of journalists (11 per cent of respondents) isolated themselves.

PPE is regarded as the most important precaution for emergency service personnel during a pandemic. The face masks were also important for stopping COVID-19 transmission. The "K" series, worn by the rich, the police, and civil servants in Bangladesh, is a little better; however, it is likely that the majority of journalists in the sample were using the free cloth masks distributed by the Government and non-government organizations. The cloth face masks were usually used in Bangladesh and have since been found to be of very limited value in stopping COVID-19 transmission (Johansson, 2021). Hand sanitiser is more effective in stopping coronavirus transmission, but the virus is airborne, can be propelled by sneezes and coughs, and can linger in the air.

True isolation is most effective in preventing coronavirus transmission, but a journalist cannot work that way, beyond online or telephone interviews. A journalist has to see people and places that no one shows him/her. Thus, PPE is the best option for journalists: it blocks most coronavirus transmission but leaves the journalist free to travel, see what is happening, inspect locations, go where he/she would never be taken, etc.

Yet the data show that only 45 percent of journalists received PPE. Among the 45 percent who received PPE, 78 percent had to get it themselves: 8 percent received it from private organizations, 3 percent from employers, and 5 percent from the state. Six percent of respondents did not answer this question.

Employers mostly abrogated their moral, if not legal, obligation to protect the people gathering the news that made their revenue possible. Almost all of the employers (97 per cent) put their journalists, unprotected or minimally so, into a potentially deadly milieu and, in effect, threw them under the bus.

Yet a television reporter from Natore District raised a contrary view:

I have no confidence in PPEs because of their poor quality. Despite using PPEs and other safety measures, a surprising number of government officials have become infected in my District. If the Government or any other organization wishes to provide PPE, they must maintain its quality. At the same time, the Government provided vaccinations to police and doctors from the beginning of the pandemic, but what about the journalists who worked alongside them?" (Interviewee number 27)

The Government only provided free mass vaccinations later, in 2021, due to lack of supply of vaccine in 2020, after an abortive attempt to produce them in Bangladesh. Around 95 per cent of the 45 per cent of journalists who had PPE received no training on how to put on and take off PPE. Only 5 per cent of the total respondents received training in use of PPE. Incorrectly used, PPE is not effective in stopping coronavirus transmission. Perhaps this explains the Natore journalist's, above, report that many civil servants who had used PPE still got infected with COVID-19. The PPE which a minority of Bangladesh rural journalists acquired, by whatever means, without the needed training, was therefore probably of minimal effect in protecting them from coronavirus.

Physical and Legal Threats in covering the News

A total of 28 per cent of respondents received threats while reporting on COVID-19. Among them, 30 per cent stated that they had been threatened by local administration and 53 per cent by "others". Meanwhile, 17 per cent were threatened by persons in the private sector. A Kurigram District journalist reported:

Because it is a hazardous profession, we face a number of pressures if we want to cover and publish irregularities, nepotism, and corruption-related issues. I received threats from a variety of sources for publishing information about irregularities in relief activities during COVID-19 period. Even after the respective authority provided evidence to support the complaints, the concerned influential Chairmen and their coteries verbally threatened me several times (Interviewee number 07).

Most professional journalists working in the community consider verbal and physical assault to be a part of the job and there is some evidence in the literature to support their conclusion in Bangladesh. In 2020, the human rights organization, Article 19, recorded a total of 265 attacks on journalists, with approximately 80 per cent of attacks coming from the grassroots level (ARTICLE 19, 2021).

Overuse of the Digital Security Act, 2018, also intimidated journalists during the pandemic. A reporter from Thakurgaon District elaborated:

Due to a lack of protection for the freedom of the press, we have faced several challenges in gathering corruption-related news during the coronavirus emergency. Some Dhaka colleagues were charged and detained under the DSA for publishing corruption of powerful people in the media, which affects our willingness to cover such issues in our Districts. Local government officials, influential politicians and local journalist cliques use the threat of complaints under the DSA to intimidate us when we try to report corruption- and nepotism-related news (Interviewee number 47).

The international NGO, Article 19 (2020), documented a total of 60 cases of using the DSA to prosecute 100 people, including 22 journalists, for criticising Government and non-government initiatives in Bangladesh against coronavirus, in traditional and social media, in Bangladesh during the first five months of 2020.

Earlier literature suggested (Raj et al., 2010) that journalists in Bangladesh have encountered safety and security challenges, which include personal safety and protection from physical attack etc. (“individual” influence in the hierarchy of influences model), low pay, a lack of training and motivation (“organizational” influence in the hierarchy of influences model), difficulty in obtaining information (“routine” influence in the hierarchy of influences model) and psychological stress (“ideological” influence’ in the hierarchy of influences model). For these reasons, the hierarchy of influences model appears to be applicable to the study of journalists’ context in Bangladesh.

Psychological Stress

Overall, 83 per cent of respondents reported psychological stress and trauma as a result of COVID-19 infection, personally or of family members, scarcity of PPEs, lack of proper treatment, less and irregular payment and financial uncertainty. A journalist from the Rangpur District said:

I am always mentally troubled due to a lack of financial security. It is extremely difficult to support my family when payments from media outlets are irregular. I typically receive adequate financial assistance from a per centage of advertisement revenue, but this all dried up during the pandemic, leaving a big hole in my income (Interviewee number 56).

In total, 23 per cent of respondents reported that they were frequently in mental distress and 12 per cent said they were distressed all the time during the COVID-19 emergency. Some journalists felt guilty when they visited high-risk places, came home and their family members got infected. An online journalist from Naogaon stated:

We always felt emotional trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the high risk of infection. We had to go to high-risk places like hospitals, clinics, testing centers, etc. I sometimes thought I might be infected too. I share the same room with my family, even when I come back from travelling to high-risk areas, as we have no other rooms to sleep in. So I was always worried and felt guilty that I might infect them with a fatal disease (Interviewee number 46).

Most respondents found that managing their physical and mental health during the pandemic was more difficult and important than “traditional” risks of journalism in the global south, which includes sudden and forced termination, mobile phone surveillance, online communication hacking, etc. (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016; Jamil, 2019).

Challenges of Journalists in gathering Information on COVID-19

Journalists must work regularly and gather information from various sources to cover news. They must be in public places and they have to talk to people. They must touch documents that others have touched. COVID-19 made all of these potentially-fatal behaviours. The disease made the normal and necessary behaviour of journalism dangerous, yet the journalists had to engage in it or risk losing their jobs. Not only their lives but their families’ lives depended on taking this risk of infection in order to meet basic needs. Respondents reported that they were unable to maintain social distance while gathering information in high-risk infection areas. COVID-19 also made informants less willing to meet and share information, so there was a lack of that free flow of information on which journalism relies.

Yet, 55 per cent of respondents did not consider it a challenge to gather information during the panic. Perhaps they adjusted to the challenges with experience until they were no longer challenges. Most probably; they learned how to adapt journalism to the disease-ridden environment: they learned how to gather information online, to use the telephone and online meeting apps in place of personal meetings and to receive documentary information by e-mail instead of in person.

While 44 per cent of respondents said that they faced challenges in gathering information, further investigation indicated that 90 per cent of these respondents were talking about a lack of health safety equipment as the “challenge”.

A correspondent from the Natore District said:

Because journalism is a challenging profession, it is extremely difficult to survive without being challenged. Meanwhile, we are engaged in a competitive process of broadcasting the same news in a limited period. Due to the pandemic and the Government’s regulations, we are having difficulty in getting interviews from high-level government officials in time to get them into our reporting (Interviewee number 06).

Despite the worldwide campaign to “stay at home and stay safe” during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists could not do journalism this way. Only a few journalists from the Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions were given the opportunity to work solely from home. The majority of journalists (83 per cent of respondents) said they worked from both home and office. Only 2 per cent of journalists in the sample said that they worked only from the office. Only 15 per cent of respondents were able to work solely from home. More than two-third of journalists (85 per cent of respondents) went outside to perform their professional duties.

More than half of journalists (58 per cent of respondents) thought COVID-19 infection was an important risk in their workplace and 42 per cent thought it was

risky to go to work. The perceptions differed depending on the area. The bureau chief of a well-known TV channel in Sirajganj said:

We were facing difficulties obtaining on-the-spot coverage due to the ongoing floods and *Qurbani* (sacrifices of animals during *Eid-Ul-Azha*, a national and religious holiday) in my locality. We are compelled to go to crowded places and sometimes forget safety tips due to the pressure of continuous reporting. Most people in our rural area are not aware of the importance of wearing masks and maintaining social distance (Interviewee number 07).

To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 infection, the Government of Bangladesh declared a general holiday beginning March 26, 2020, later extended until May 30, 2020. Following that, on a limited scale, all offices, shopping malls, business shops, and public buses reopened on May 31 provided they adhered to 13 health directives. Journalists worked as frontline fighters during the general holiday. They had to visit various locations, particularly hospitals, lockdown zones, and vulnerable areas, to gather information. Less than half of the respondent journalists (40 per cent) stated that they visited people and places to gather news where there was real social distancing being practiced. More than one third of journalists (36 per cent of respondents) frequently visited such locations.

Most journalists said that they had made a conscious choice to risk their own lives in order to save their jobs: by surrendering to Fate on the matter of COVID-19. Such a choice might have been avoided if the media organizations had hired extra journalists to support their pre-pandemic staff: but most did not even have enough money to pay their pre-existing staff regularly or well, let alone to take on extra staff.

It is evident that people, organizations, and Governments were all profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in unforeseen ways (Josephson and Michler, 2021). As a result, the dynamics of the safety and security concerns faced by journalists changed as a result of the necessity to deliver accurate information about COVID-19. According to the "hierarchy of influences model," Bangladeshi journalists and media had to navigate a variety of individual, institutional, and environmental challenges when covering the COVID-19 pandemic on an individual, societal, and institutional level.

Integrated Discussion: Hierarchy-of-Influences Model Analysis

The Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model was originally developed by Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese, and then was modified by Stephen Reese in 2019. This analytical framework illustrates how a multiple, layered forces influence journalistic practices. This model emphasizes that influences function concurrently across interconnected levels rather than attributing news production to a single factor, such as individual choices or institutional pressures.

Mapping Findings through the Hierarchy-of-Influences Framework

The hierarchy-of-influences model (Reese, 2019) reveals dropping vulnerabilities from individual experiences through organisational structures to larger societal systems, offering a methodical lens for comprehending how journalists' safety concerns during COVID-19 operated across interconnected micro, meso, and macro levels.

Micro Level: Individual Vulnerabilities and Agency

The approach focuses on the professional values, work experiences, role perceptions, personal safety concerns, emotional stress, and ethical orientations of journalists. Even while journalists' autonomy is recognized, larger structural factors limit their options (Hanitzsch et al., 2010). Our results show significant effects at the individual level: 83 per cent reported psychological and emotional stress due to worries about family safety, financial anxiety, and personal safety concerns regarding infection fears (see more on psychological stress). Even though 58 per cent of respondents acknowledged serious workplace dangers (see more on job security), 85 per cent persisted in field reporting (see more on the difficulties faced by journalists in obtaining information). This micro-level discomfort had a direct impact on decision-making.

This concern was expressed by a journalist: "I was always worried and felt guilty that I might infect them with a fatal disease" (Interviewee 46). Journalists actively sacrificed their lives to keep their jobs, demonstrating individual agency in the form of difficult decisions between personal survival and professional obligation. As an example of how micro-level factors influence external pressures, the 28 per cent of journalists who received threats showed varying individual responses based on personal risk tolerance (see more on physical and legal threats in covering news).

Meso Level: Organizational Failures and Economic Collapse

The internal newsroom dynamics, editorial policies, managerial decisions, resource availability, job security, institutional procedures and culture, newsroom routines, and media conventions that shape journalists' work are all included in the organisational level (Reese, 2019). During crises, newsroom routines and organizational risk-management strategies become salient. According to this research, ninety-seven per cent of companies did not provide personal protective equipment (PPE), ninety-eight percent of journalists did not have health insurance, and 95 per cent did not receive any safety training (see more on Managing PPEs as part of health security). These failures were exacerbated by economic devastation: 68 out of 340 newspapers closed, 1,600 journalists lost their jobs, circulation fell by 50–70 per cent (see more on the safety and security of journalists in Bangladesh discussion), and only 58 per cent of journalists received regular pay (see more on job security and inconsistent remuneration). According to one journalist, "a lack of advertisements, circulation, and proper government support suffered from the entire media industry" (Interviewee 09).

Media organizations failed to adapt media routines to pandemic conditions, with 85 per cent of journalists working without adequate safety protocols in

gathering information (see more on challenges of journalists in gathering information). The model illuminates how meso-level organizational instability resulted from macro-level economic forces (advertising market collapse, lockdown policies) while cascading down to create micro-level individual precarity (irregular pay, job insecurity, psychological trauma).

Macro Level: Institutional Suppression and Systemic Inequality

Wider socio-political environments, legal frameworks, public health issues, governmental policies, economic constraints, market conditions, ownership structures, and global crises like COVID-19 pandemic are all included in this. Journalism is shaped by influences beyond the control of individuals and organizations, and government regulations and legal frameworks limited journalistic practice at the social institutional level. A chilling effect was caused by the Digital Security Act, which resulted in 60 cases punishing 100 people for covering COVID-19, including 22 journalists (Article 19, 2020). One journalist clarified "Some Dhaka colleagues were charged...which affects our willingness to cover such issues," (Interviewee 47). Threats came from local administration (30 per cent), influential figures (53 per cent), and private sector (17 per cent). Government failures included no unemployment benefits, exclusion from priority vaccination list, working journalists' medical facilities.

Fundamental vulnerabilities were revealed by structural factors at the most macro level—the social system. In the absence of alternative mechanisms, the advertising-dependent business model failed. Geographic disparity was glaring: "no organisation provides such benefits to journalists working outside of Dhaka," reflecting system-level ideology discounting rural journalism, whereas Dhaka-based organisations only offered health insurance and testing to capital journalists. Article 19 revealed a culture of impunity by documenting 265 attacks on journalists, of which 80 per cent were grassroots. Inadequate public health infrastructure, such as overburdened rural hospitals and a lack of national insurance, put journalists in immediate danger.

Cross-Level Interactions: The Power of Cascading Analysis

The model's analytical strength lies in revealing multi-level interactions. Macro-level economic collapse triggered meso-level organizational revenue loss, producing micro-level individual distress: "I am always mentally troubled...advertisement revenue dried up during the pandemic" (Interviewee 56). Journalists faced simultaneous multi-level pressure: DSA threats and pandemic risks (macro), no PPE and irregular payment (meso), infection fears and guilt (micro). One journalist reporting during floods exemplified this convergence: "compelled to go to crowded places and sometimes forget safety tips due to continuous reporting pressure" (Interviewee 07).

From the above discussion, it should be noted that this approach highlights the dynamic interplay of different layers, demonstrating that nested, cumulative influences rather than isolated factors are what lead to journalistic outcomes.

Theoretical Contribution and Intervention Framework

By applying the hierarchy-of-influences paradigm to journalist safety, this study demonstrates how pandemic dangers functioned concurrently at the individual (health vulnerabilities), organisational (inadequate safety practices), and governmental (weak policies) levels. Participants described this multi-level failure as creating a "dystopian context" that resulted in "wrong decisions in reporting." Coordinated action at all three levels—individual psychological support and training, organisational safety procedures and insurance, and governmental press freedom protections with financial assistance—is necessary for effective protection. Protecting journalism during international emergencies necessitates transnational, multi-level frameworks since global crises transcend national boundaries.

The contribution of this study lies on the specific intersections such as the first study conducted on hierarchy of influence model analysis on comprehensive safety dimensions during pandemic crisis among district level journalists.

Factors at the individual, social, institutional, and organizational levels define and shape the increasing safety and security risks found in this study, which in turn influences and defines journalists' individual decisions regarding media content and journalistic practice. The journalists' context was dystopian, causing them to make wrong decisions in reporting to the public. Thus, the damage to the reporting of accurate news and the insecurity and suffering caused to journalists is found to have been, fundamentally, the result of media organizations' failure to give journalists the resources that they required.

Conclusion

Despite their potentially vulnerable role in combating the coronavirus pandemic, too many journalists did not receive regular remuneration, and many news providers ceased to exist, creating unemployment and fears of unemployment. Outside Dhaka, journalists faced a variety of challenges, including a lack of motivation, financial loss and insecurity, denial of their legal rights, threats, lack of health insurance and protective equipment, intimidation under the Digital Security Act, 2018 and a constant sense of stress and insecurity, contribute to national cooperation to fight the pandemic and even to tell true news from false. Most of the time, they were just struggling to survive, barely able to support their families and keep themselves and their families safe from COVID-19 infection.

The findings substantially support the published literature on related topics and fill in large gaps in the literature about journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. However, further study with a larger sample is necessary for a comprehensive report of the problems.

More in-depth research can offer precise policy recommendations at the national and international levels to safeguard the press, its freedoms, and our freedoms as news consumers in future. Indeed, in the case of an internationalised health disaster like COVID-19, requiring an internationalised response, perhaps the press freedoms and freedom of information require international, and not just national, protection.

As all journalists in the world faced the economic shock of lockdown and collapse of many news organizations, there is a growing need for international subsidies of journalism both in the developed world and in the global south, so that the Fourth Estate could play its worldwide role in informing the world's people in all countries about what was really happening and what people could do to help in the fight against the common viral enemy.

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