

Press Freedom Dynamics in Bangladesh

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This chapter explores the state of freedom of expression and press freedom in Bangladesh and how religion, in particular, influences these issues. More specifically, through content analyses of some selected newspapers and in-depth interviews with journalists, experts and civil society representatives, this chapter reveals the barriers to press freedom and how the politics of religion is related to press freedom and freedom of expression in the country.

Past political situations, especially military rule and the struggle for democracy, have created an unstable situation for the press in Bangladesh. Moreover, religious extremism, intolerance and politics of religion jeopardize the socio-political situation of the country time and again. The period from February to March 2013 was particularly decisive as the people at this time became sharply divided on the issue of International War Crimes Tribunal¹ and its first verdict in the case of Abdul Quader Mollah². Millions of people gathered at Shahbug Square³ for more than two months and stayed there day and night, chanting slogans in favour of justice for war heroes and ensuring capital punishment for war criminals. People from all walks of lives, mainstream media as well as social media, became part of the movement. There was, of course, a section of people and media who played a more subtle role and spoke out against this movement, and the media soon became a battlefield where the war was fought by different stakeholders – proponents as well as opponents of the International War Crimes Tribunal.

The role of some media has been controversial – some were banned for news fabrication, and later a number of free thinkers and bloggers were killed. In this context the Bangladeshi Information Minister declared that ‘... any media will face legal action if they publish materials, which slander Prophet (SM) or criticize any religion in obscene language, quoting blogs or social networking sites like Facebook’ (Daily Star 2013a). On the other hand, ‘Eight Islamist parties ... threatened to call for a boycott of a section of a media for publishing and broadcasting pro-atheist and provocative news’ (Daily Star 2013b). Therefore, it is important to unveil the complex relations of

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religion, freedom of expression and press freedom and show how these issues were presented in the newspapers during that critical, politically-hyped time in the country.

The context

Bangladesh emerged as a secular country, a fact recognized by its very first constitution formulated in 1972. However, in 1977, the 5th amendment of the constitution – ‘Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah (God)’ – was added (Bangladesh Constitution [1972] 1977). Adherence to this clause has contributed to politics of religion, which has grown into a vital phenomenon in the country. Some religious-based political parties emerged and the politics of religion has subsequently raised many puzzling questions in Bangladesh and is seen as a drawback for the country.

Though the majority of the population in Bangladesh are Muslim, the country does not practice Islamic law and there are also people from other religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, as well as people from other tribal religions.

However, as religious-based political parties use propaganda media in order to influence the people in the name of religion, restrictions on the press are almost invited. Conversely, the authorities may use this as an opportunity to suppress the press for entirely self-interested reasons. Thus, press freedom and freedom of expression are directly or indirectly threatened by the widespread practice of the politics of religion.

To assess the press freedom situation, we ask: 1. What is the general trend of newspaper coverage of the issues relating to freedom of expression and press freedom and politics of religion? 2. What are the thoughts of journalists and civil society representatives about the prevailing situation of press freedom, freedom of expression and politics of religion in the country? 3. What are the barriers to freedom of expression and press freedom? 4. How is freedom of expression and press freedom reconciled with the politics of religion in the country?

Theoretical background

Freedom of expression is integral to self-fulfilment, as the expression of thoughts and feelings is part of being human (Ash 2011). Moreover, freedom of expression is essential in order to understand diversity and the differing perspectives of society. All the relevant facts and arguments on any given issue need to be brought up so that the most rational explanations can win. Cory states:

It is difficult to imagine a guaranteed right more important to a democratic society than freedom of expression. Indeed a democracy cannot exist without that freedom to express new ideas and to put forward opinions about the functioning of public institutions. The concept of free and uninhibited speech permeates all truly

democratic societies and institutions. The vital importance of the concept cannot be over-emphasized. (Cory 1989, as quoted in Duhaime's Law Dictionary).

Sean MacBride (1980) states, 'The principle of freedom of expression is one that admits of no exceptions and that is applicable to the people all over the world by virtue of their human dignity.' (MacBride1980:10). The idea of press freedom is connected to that of freedom of speech and human rights. Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) says 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (UN 1948:5).

Freedom of the press is necessary for assuring individual rights to disseminate thoughts through any media. Albert Venn Dicey (1885) affirms that, 'The freedom of press means the right of a person to publish what he pleases in books or newspapers' (Dicey as quoted in Alam 1992:8). India addressed press freedom as an important part of freedom of speech and expression in its constitution. Section 1 of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution ([1949] 2015) states, 'All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression,' and this right fundamentally includes the freedom of the press.

On the other hand, according to the Article 39 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh ([1972] 2011):

1. Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed.
2. Subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the states, public order, decency or morality, or in relations to contempt of court, defamation or incitements to an offence. (a) The right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression and (b) Freedom of the press are guaranteed.

Scanlon (1972) argues that government can only limit freedom of expression in cases of enormous disorder. However, the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees freedom of expression to its citizens subject to some reasonable restrictions. And, in many situations, these restrictions end up protecting religious values and thoughts.

Methodology

This chapter is based on the content related to press freedom, freedom of expression and politics of religion in six mainstream newspapers in Bangladesh. Data was gathered through a content analysis based on 14 variables⁴, and in order to get comparative and representative data, newspapers from diverse political and ideological backgrounds were analyzed. Of the six analysed papers, two are English daily newspapers and four are Bangla language dailies.

The Prothom Alo is the most circulated, liberal progressive Bangla daily newspaper of Bangladesh. The Daily Ittefaq is one of the oldest newspapers in the country and has played a significant role in different historical periods. The Daily Janakhantho is also a prominent daily newspaper of Bangladesh. This newspaper leans towards the ruling

Awami League government and the values of liberalism. The Daily Star, meanwhile, has the highest circulation of any English newspaper in Bangladesh. These newspapers are all considered to be driven by progressive-capitalistic and liberal values.

The English-language daily, The New Age, by contrast, is ideologically progressive and left leaning, and with a lower circulation. The Daily Naya Diganta is owned and run by the people who were actively against the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 – namely the political party, Jamat-i-Islami Bangladesh. This party is blamed for spreading political religiosity and religious politics in the country.

The examined period stretches from 1 February 2013 to 31 March 2013, a period during which Bangladesh was facing a political dilemma and crisis with respect to the values of Bengali nationalism and the culture and spirit of the liberation war. In response to the verdict of life imprisonment delivered on war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah, the Shahbug movement erupted, led by bloggers and social media activists demanding his capital punishment. Subsequently, some bloggers were killed and some media banned. In this context, an analysis of print press coverage of that period may indicate how the print media deals with issues of press freedom and freedom of expression.

In order to substantiate the results, findings from a total of 20 interviews with journalists, members of civil society and academic experts complement the content analysis. Thirteen journalists, four academics and three representatives of civil society in Bangladesh were interviewed to gauge their perceptions on press freedom and freedom of expression. The interviews were semi-structured and concentrated on the existing press freedom situation in Bangladesh, obstacles to freedom of expression and the recent press situation.

The general coverage

A total of 546 items relating to the issues of press freedom, freedom of expression and politics of religion were published in the selected six daily newspapers during the two month study period. On average nine items were published in the selected newspaper every single day, indicating the gravity of the situation in that politically-hyped study period, as well as the seriousness of the media in addressing freedom of expression in general.

Among the examined titles, the individual newspaper that published most articles was The Daily Ittefaq (a popular and widely read Bangla newspaper). Here, a total of 105 items related to press freedom, freedom of expression and the politics of religion were published.

However, nearly as many, 104, were published in The Daily Naya Diganta, a conservative, right-leaning daily owned and run by Mir Kashem Ali, who was later convicted of war crimes.

Following these, both The Daily Star (the most circulated English daily) and The Daily Prothom Alo published 91 items, and 90 items were found in The Daily Jana-

Table 1. Coverage of press freedom, freedom of expression and the politics of religion

Newspapers	Number of items
The Ittefaq	105
The Naya Diganta	104
The Daily Star	91
The Prothom Alo	91
The Janakantho	90
The New Age	65
Total	546

Comments: Items refers to journalistic genre i.e. news, editorial, op-ed, feature, post editorial etc.

kantha (a newspaper considered to uphold liberal values). Least items were found in another of the liberal English language newspapers, The New Age, with a total of 65 items during the period under study.

The fact that a conservative daily such as The Daily Naya Diganta published so many items on issues related to press freedom, freedom of expression and the politics of religion may seem intriguing. However, qualitative reading reveals that most of its items covered the issues from a negative angle.

Factors affecting press freedom and freedom of expression

Factors affecting press freedom were categorized by in-depth reading of the published items in the selected dailies. An attempt was made to connect the items to different barriers to freedom of expression and they were later categorized according to sub-variables under investigation, such as government/ruling political parties, opposition parties, religious parties, media owners, self-censorship, law enforcement agencies, threats by miscreants etc. The following table shows the barriers to press freedom and freedom of expression in Bangladesh as presented in the six newspapers.

The dominant barrier: Islamist political parties

Table 2 shows that the by far largest share, 66 per cent of the items, refers to religious parties as barriers to freedom of expression and press freedom in Bangladesh. Activists of different Islamist parties declared an offensive against journalists, evident in a story in the *Daily Star* from 23 February 2013: ‘In a countrywide reign of terror, Jamaate-e-Islami ...attacked law enforcers and journalists, burned the national flag and vandalized Shaheed Minars to counter the mass demand for capital punishment to 1971 war criminals’ (Daily Star 2013c).

Religious parties try to motivate people by the name of religion: Islam. A news story with the headline ‘Islamists threaten non-stop strike’, in the New Age, reads

Table 2. Barriers to freedom of expression and press freedom as reflected in the newspapers

Barriers to press freedom	Per cent
Religious parties	66
Opposition parties	9
Threats by miscreants	7
Others	6
Media and owners of media institutions	5
Government/ruling political parties	5
Journalists' self-censorship	1
Laws and policies	1
Police and other law enforcement agencies	0
Total	100

Comments: The number of coded items is 546.

‘Thousands of Islamists went on demonstrations across the country ...demanding punishment of atheist bloggers of Shabugh for derogatory remarks about Islam and its Prophet Muhammad (SM)’ (New Age 2013). It seems that the targeting of journalists and bloggers by Islamist parties means that their freedom of expression is restricted.

Journalists and media owners

A united media has had glorious roles in different developments in Bangladesh’s history. However, the situation has changed recently as the journalist community has become divided and influenced by the political ideology of the owners of certain media, a development that is sometimes reflected in the journalists’ writings and reports. Even in the case of developing professionalism in the field, ensuring good wages and job security, the journalist community is not united. This weakens the voice of journalists in upholding and protecting freedom of expression and press freedom in the country. The whole journalist community should be a proponent of press freedom, but six stories in Table 2 cite journalists themselves and their self-censorship as barriers to press freedom.

Media owners also affect the practice of press freedom and freedom of expression. It is often reported that the owners or their representatives advise the newsroom not to publish certain types of news stories. If any news runs against the business interest of the media house and its policy, then that news never sees the light of day. And, in the same vein, in cases where the media owners belong to a political party, that particular media outlet often refrains from publishing news hostile to its owners’ political ideology.

This is reflected in five per cent of the items which hold that owners of media institutions are barriers to press freedom. One interviewee claims that media owners do not support press freedom and improving the quality of journalism. He says,

‘We asked the private TV channels to provide funding for the training of upcoming journalists to be equipped with state-of-the-art technology and techniques for writing freely. However, they are not interested in increasing quality or bringing any change to the existing situation’ (Interviewee 1).

Government and ruling political parties

In many developing nations, governments and ruling political parties are seen as one of the biggest obstacles to a free press. This also applies to Bangladesh, although only five per cent of the items single out Bangladesh’s government and ruling political party as a press freedom barrier.

During the undemocratic regime, the government used to send press advices in order to control the press. The situation has changed over the years but the government is still reported to sometimes take sides against media freedom. As an example, consider the following headline: ‘Media cautioned: Information Minister warns some newspapers against religious instigation.’ The accompanying story states, ‘The government yesterday asked all the print and electronic media to refrain from running any motivated story that may exploit people’s religious sentiments’ (Daily Star 2013d). The request obliges journalists not to write about any issue that relates to religion out of fear of a possible instigation case against the reporter. This ministerial warning was reinforced by an SMS, urging ‘the people to remain alert to circulation of fictitious publications dishonouring the Prophet (SM) as well as bids to make derogatory remarks about the (war crimes) tribunal’. It was titled: ‘Stay alert over defaming Islam’ and sent to all mobiles.

Conversely, journalists and media are also accused of abusing press freedom. The right-leaning daily The Amar Desh published a news story about a march against the death penalty for convicted war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah, which was led by the Imam of The Holy Macca. But the story was later found to be false, indicating that some media may invite government intervention against the press due to their irresponsible, unethical journalism.

The editor/owner of Amar Desh, which tends to support the opposition party, criticized other media outlets for their stance against his newspaper for its falsity and news fabrication. This was reflected in the headline ‘Mahmudur Slams Media’. The story explains, ‘Amar Desh acting editor Mahmudur Rahman launched a scathing attack on the media and journalist leaders yesterday for criticizing his stance on the Shahbugh movement. He also accused journalists of turning into activists over the Shahbugh demonstration’ (Daily Star 2013e). He charged most of the media, including top newsmen and editors, with having no shame. In a story with the headline ‘Three Newspapers Abusing Press Freedom – says Information Minister’, Information Minister Hasanul Huq Inu was reported as accusing national daily newspapers, Amar Desh, Naya Diganta and Sangram, of spreading propaganda against the young people’s Shahbugh movement (Daily Star 2013f).

Thus, sometimes a section of the oppositional press creates hurdles to press freedom. It is notable that the second largest share of the items, nine per cent, is about opposition parties acting as a barrier to press freedom in the country.

Corporate pressure

The economy of newspapers is, in general, highly dependent on advertisement from the public sector and private companies. Therefore the press usually has a flexible attitude towards negative news about its advertisers, fearing that otherwise they may lose advertisements.

One interviewee, who has an important position in a leading television channel, indicates that there is no direct pressure from government on the press nowadays. However, another interviewee remarks, 'There are pressures from big corporate organizations and we are obliged to them for keeping the constant flow of advertisement' (Interviewee 2).

Moreover, journalists and members of civil society highlight the self-interest of journalists which makes them self-censor. Though they did not explain the nature of this self-interest, the implied meaning could be indulging in bias towards some parties and favouring them because of partisan behaviour or mutual interest.

Life threats and killings

Journalists in Bangladesh also face life threats from time to time, and several journalists have been killed since the independence in 1971. Besides that, journalists face other threats such as physical torture, phone threats and abduction.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ 2012), 12 journalists were murdered in Bangladesh between 1992 and March 2012. Most of their killers escaped prosecution. Three quarters of those who died were covering crime and/or corruption stories at the time (CDAC 2012). Another report says only three of the 27 cases filed in connection with the murder of journalists in the past 15 years have so far been completed – with conviction in one case and acquittal in the other two.

Journalists offer a variety of opinions about the killing of other journalists. Most journalists regard these killings as equal to the murder of any other citizen. Few of them assert that the journalists were killed because of their journalism. Rather, they were killed for other personal reasons or due to business rivalry. An editor of a newspaper says, 'A few of the journalists were killed for professional reasons. Mostly, journalists involved with other side-businesses, along with journalism, were killed due to conflicting business interests' (Interviewee 3).

This does not decrease the gravity of the killings but it may well relate to the overall law and order situation in the country. Moreover, murder trials have not taken place due to flaws in the legal system. Civil society representatives realize that Bangladesh's

legal structure is incapable of ensuring the security of its citizens. An academic of media law and ethics says:

The matter of insecurity is applicable for all. In a developing country like Bangladesh, there is no need to say anything specifically for journalists. I am not sure whether I will be able to reach my house safely. Working journalists are facing all kinds of risks. Who will give security to them? How can we talk about safety of journalists only? (Interviewee 5).

However, an editor of a newspaper demands special security for journalists in order to ensure the safety of their profession. He states:

Journalists face serious life threats in Bangladesh. Shamsur Rahman, Manik Saha, Humayun Kabir Balu and recently Sagor-Runi, a journalist couple, were killed. Our legal system is highly politicized. Therefore our press becomes victim of this situation. So I think the government should take proper steps and ensure the security of the journalists (Interviewee 6).

Several other interviewees claim that the historical/political background demeans press freedom in Bangladesh. But the present situation is far better than under the military regime during the 1980s. One says:

I've been involved with journalism since the 80s. During the military government I was working on the news desk of a newspaper. We used to get phone calls at night asking for news modification, and to discard some news. Nowadays those problems are not heard, and press freedom is much better than at any other time (Interviewee 9).

Positive or negative? Differences in *how* press freedom and freedom of expression is being covered

Our analysis revealed that 546 items were published in the selected daily newspapers during the study period. However, they did not all relate to the issues in the same way. The connection of the items was investigated from two perspectives – those that were positively related to press freedom and freedom of expression and those negatively related to press freedom and freedom of expression.

Figure 1 shows that the largest share, 41 per cent, was negatively related to freedom of expression. These stories highlight the negative aspects of freedom of expression. A story titled, 'Blogger Rajib was targeted for his blog' indirectly blames his freedom of expression for putting his life in danger. The story explains how 'Online Jamaat-Shibir activists had branded the slain blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider as an atheist who they said should have been resisted' (Daily Star 2013g). Thus, freedom of expression as a basic human value has been undermined. It suggests that if somebody does write freely it is normal for them to be victimised or killed.

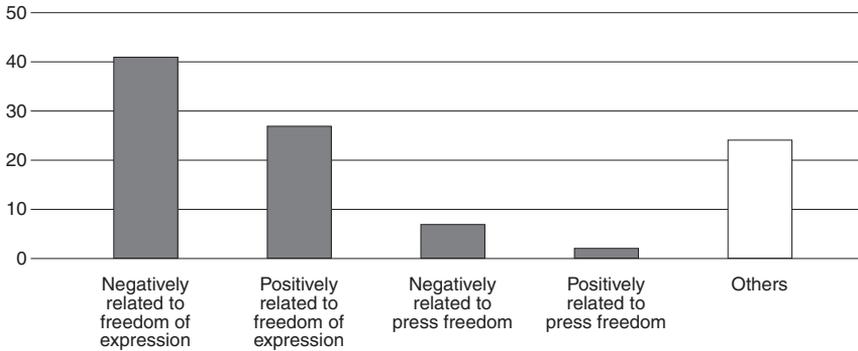


Figure 1. Positive and negative attitudes towards press freedom and freedom of expression (per cent)

Comments: The number of coded items is 546.

The second largest share, 27 per cent of the items, was positively related to freedom of expression. An example is a story with the headline, ‘OUTRAGED: People take to the streets to air anger over the verdict – demand death penalty for Quader Mollah’ (Daily Star 2013h).

Thus, all in all it is evident that both positive and negative attitudes towards freedom of expression occurred in the newspapers during the study period. While the articles focusing on negative aspects were more common, 147 of the articles related to freedom of expression in a positive way.

By contrast, only two per cent of the items were positively related to press freedom, while seven per cent were negatively related to press freedom. Regarding this issue, it seems that newspapers are giving more space to items that highlight and uphold the significance of press freedom. However, as they are few in numbers compared to items about freedom of expression, questions about the media’s seriousness with regard to their freedom can be raised.

Yet, journalists’ view of the press situation in Bangladesh is that they currently enjoy more freedom than in earlier times. One interviewee recalls:

I have been working as a journalist for 21 years. Now I am a decision-maker of a television channel. We have faced different political situations. We can evaluate the time in comparison with military government, last BNP-led government and the caretaker government of January 2007. Currently I do not get any calls to cancel news from the authority concerned (Interviewee 8).

25 per cent of the examined items have been coded as ‘others’, and most of them relate to the politics of religion. In these items, negative aspects are strongly prevalent – a perspective reflected in the headline, ‘Fanatic Now Targets Journos’. The piece says: ‘Jamat-e-Islami and Islamic Chhatra Shibir men attacked and injured at least 15 jour-

nalists ... launched attack on electronic and print media personnel ... police were seen as inactive during the attack' (Daily Star 2013i).

Journalists and civil society members draw attention to the recent incident when two TV channels were taken off air for contributing to huge anarchy by live coverage of Hefajot-e-Islam's demonstration on 5 May 2013.

Journalists and civil society representatives did not consider the banning of these channels, and the subsequent government action regarding these media institutions, as harmful for press freedom considering the circumstances of the study period:

Recently Bangladesh has watched an unforgettable situation about politics, secularism and the verdict of war criminals. It was an acid test for the press of Bangladesh. But unfortunately they failed to observe neutrality. Some press were used as the propaganda tool of a party. It creates ethnic violence all over the country. When the press goes beyond their ethical stand, government has to put an action on that (Interviewee 10).

Some stories were related to the ethics of journalism too. If journalism is not practiced ethically there is a possibility for intervention. One interviewee emphasizes the responsibility and professionalism of journalists in ensuring press freedom. According to the interviewee, 'journalists are losing their credibility and professionalism due to a small number of dishonest journalists' (Interviewee 11).

Another interviewee holds press owners responsible for unethical journalism:

Have you ever seen any fresh medical student doing a surgical operation? But, first or second year journalism students are recruited for professional work. This entry without completing educational training may affect the quality of journalism as well as access to information and the exercise of press freedom (Interviewee 1).

Social media

How the stories about press freedom, freedom of expression and the politics of religion relate to different media enables a media-centric understanding of the press freedom situation in Bangladesh.

Figure 2 shows that the largest share, 66 per cent of the items, relates to social media. This is not very surprising since social media has emerged as an important alternative platform for the expression of people's opinions, as well as getting others' views on different issues. Consequently, what happens on social media becomes the focus of coverage in the newspapers too. Though the Internet use began in Bangladesh earlier than in many other developing countries, the growth rate has greatly accelerated after the introduction of social media in the country.

According to Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Bangladesh (BTRC 2017), the total number of Internet subscribers reached 67.2 million in 2017. Among

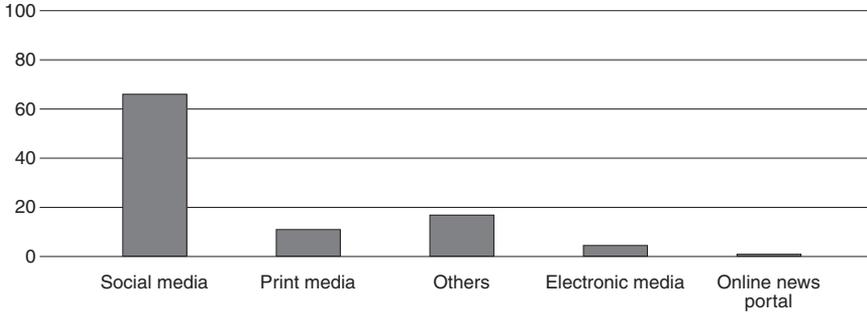


Figure 2. Media connection of the stories (per cent)

Comments: The number of coded items is 546.

the users, 80 per cent are on social networking sites, especially Facebook (Daily Star 2015). These figures show that the Bangladeshi people are active in the virtual world and that social media is acting as a catalyst of socio-political movements.

Consequently, the content analysis finds that of all 546 items related to freedom of the press, freedom of expression and the politics of religion, the Daily Star published 91 items and 57 per cent of these were related to social media. The Daily Prothom Alo also supplied 91 items, 71 per cent of which were related to social media. The Daily Janakantha weighed in with 90 items, and 53 per cent were related to social media. The Daily New Age was responsible for 65 items and of that batch 68 per cent were related to social media. The Daily Ittefaq topped the poll with 105 items. Of those 105, 74 per cent were related to social media, The Daily Naya Diganta was just behind with 104 items, of which 59 per cent of the items were related to social media.

Considering the context of the study period it is not surprising that social media are monitored by the mainstream newspapers and received wide coverage. Being a democratic and easily accessible site, free thinkers, Islamists, and extremists all use social media to reflect on their values, spread and disseminate their ideas and opinion about different issues. Hence, the mainstream newspapers also wrote stories, published op-ed, letters and columns about what happened in the social media world and how they would affect law and order situation, stability in the country, religious harmony and so on.

In recent years, negative aspects of social media have also become all the more obvious, not least by the dissemination of extremist thoughts via social networking sites. Creating anarchy by sharing hoaxes or deceptive information is alarming and, most dangerously, social media is being used to lay the groundwork for anti-social activities (Abir 2016).

However, social media has also power to organize people around multiple issues. It was observed that the Shahbug movement was largely influenced by social media activists, demonstrating the increasing dependence of people on social media (Curtis 2015). As social media provide an opportunity to express opinions, as well as a space

to create disturbance, its relevance with respect to press freedom and freedom of expression is a factor in all newspapers' coverage.

Voice in the story

The 'voice in the story' refers to opinions, statements and comments that were quoted in the stories. Thus 'voice' reveals who says what on what issues, among the many stakeholders in the field. Analysis of 'voice' is important as it helps to identify the proponents and opponents of press freedom.

Table 3. Voices in the story

	Per cent
Islamic political voice	54
Government and ruling political party voice	14
Journalist voice	9
Political right voice	8
Other voice	6
Civil society voice	4
Foreign voice	3
Legal experts and think-tanks voice	1
Political left voice	1
Total	100

Comments: The number of coded items is 546.

Table 3 shows that a majority, 54 per cent, of the articles quote Islamic political voices in the stories. This is evidence of the presence of religious parties as active actors on the issues under investigation, and it also shows their concern about press freedom and the freedom of expression situation in the country. However, as it has been observed that Islamists are *opposed* to free expression, their voice does not help to enhance press freedom. Rather it provokes more intervention and hurdles on the road to press freedom.

Government and ruling political voices are quoted in 14 per cent of the articles. Depending on the context, these voices appear as either proponents or opponents of press freedom and freedom of expression. The situation was complex due to the division among the media where some follow the rules of the game and some do not. Playing the role of referee, the voice of the government and ruling political parties becomes coercive to some extent as they serve the greater cause of the national interest and maintaining peace in society.

On the other hand, nine per cent of the items quote the voice of the political right. Their voices are found attacking the government as well as other media, as media out-

lets favouring the right-wing were criticized for their unethical journalistic role. There were only three items which quoted the political left voice, a surprisingly low figure.

In comparison, the voices of journalists were quoted in nine per cent of the items, and members of civil society occurred in four per cent of the items.

Conclusion

The content analysis of the newspapers shows that the issues of press freedom, freedom of expression and politics of religion received extensive coverage during the study period.

However, this coverage cannot be generalized as it is the portrayal of a complex time when the issue of press freedom became very divisive among the political parties and their followers. Both working journalists and civil society members who were interviewed think that the present press freedom situation in Bangladesh is far better than in the past and nowadays they do not get any press advices from the authorities. However, they engage in self-censorship when it comes to religious issues, as they fear legal suits for religious instigation. Yet, while there are many barriers to press freedom in the country, religious political parties are the most vociferous opponents of press freedom and freedom of expression.

As the study period was defined by an ideological conflict between liberal-secular and Islamist forces, the practice and perception of press freedom and freedom of expression was largely shaped by the politics of religion.

Notes

1. The International War Crimes Tribunal (Bangladesh) is a domestic war crimes tribunal set up in 2009 to investigate and prosecute the suspects for the genocide committed by the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Twenty-four people have so far been convicted of war crimes by this tribunal and so far six of them have been hanged.
2. Convicted and hanged for war crimes committed in 1971 during the Liberation War of Bangladesh.
3. A place in Dhaka where a massive demonstration took place in 2013 demanding capital punishment for those convicted of war crimes.
4. The variables under study were: size of the story; source of news; newspaper own stuff; source; news agency; treatment; page location; treatment; headline; section of the newspaper; genre; reporting items; genre; opinion item; story relevance; gender relevance of the story; media relevance of the story; voice in the story; and factors affecting freedom of expression & press freedom etc.

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