

Drop of Circulation of Print Dailies during COVID-19 Crisis in Bangladesh: How Far is Readers' Return?

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of not resubscribing print newspapers after unsubscribing them for households by readers during the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. In terms of theory, this study consulted displacement theory and the theory of media habits to evaluate the contexts of quitting reading print dailies and unsubscribing print papers under a pandemic environment. To understand the picture, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with 12 persons (six males and six females) who stuck to their decision not to resubscribe print national dailies for their houses as the COVID-19 situation improved at one point in time. The key findings are: i) readers unsubscribed print newspapers out of fear of getting infected by coronavirus either through the copies of papers or delivery persons; ii) readers did not resubscribe print papers as they developed a habit of reading news on online news portals, e-papers, and social media pages of news outlets; and iii) although readers are somewhat satisfied with the information and news that they find on digital platforms, they hold a passion for print papers, and cherished their longtime habit of reading print newspapers.

Keywords: Print Newspapers, Bangladesh, Circulation, COVID-19, Digital Platforms

Introduction

Like elsewhere in the world, the sector of print newspapers in Bangladesh was affected by the COVID-19 crisis. As the pandemic hit Bangladesh in March 2020, the financial strength of print newspapers started breaking down, mainly due to a plummet in circulation of newspaper copies and the flow of advertisements to newspapers. In an interview, Mahfuz Anam, editor of Bangladesh's leading English-language newspaper *Daily Star*, and an executive member of the Newspaper Owners Association of Bangladesh

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(NOAB), identified this crisis as "deadly and unprecedented" for the country's newspaper industry (Jamuna Television, 2020). According to Mondol and Paul (2021), the Bangladeshi media industry was severely hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic. Government and private advertisements in newspapers decreased during the pandemic, putting print newspapers and their journalists into a financial crisis (Mondol and Paul, 2021). This financial crisis affected the journalists and operations of print newspapers. Generally, the income of a print newspaper depends on two sources – the money coming from the sale of copies of newspapers and the advertisers for publishing advertisements. As these two revenue-generating sources of print newspapers were disrupted during the pandemic, the newspaper industry experienced a financial crisis that disturbed the regular operations of newspapers. A total of 254 out of 340 national dailies – registered with the government – stopped their operations within four months of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh (Sharifuzzaman, 2020).

In order to cope with the changed financial realities, almost every print newspaper started following several cost-cutting strategies that included dismissing journalists, reducing the number of pages of a paper, and publishing a single edition in a day. Initially, the circulation of copies of print dailies began to fall because of a scarcity of hawkers to distribute papers during a countrywide shutdown enforced by the government in late March 2020 to control the dissemination of the COVID-19 virus. Later, many subscribers of print papers decided to stop purchasing copies of newspapers at their places following the spread of a message on social networking platforms that identified print copies of newspapers as a potential source of transmission of COVID-19 to human bodies. In addition, the subscribers, as a measure of precaution, preferred avoiding the presence of newspaper delivery persons on their doorsteps. However, people's thirst for news and information, especially on COVID-19-related issues, was always there. The results of a survey conducted on people from 17 European countries show that the level of news consumption, especially of certain sorts, increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Aelst et al., 2021). Due to easy accessibility, people in pandemic days chose social media, internet, and televisions for news, whereas the level of consumption of radio and newspapers was unchanged or declined (Van Aelst et al., 2021). It happened at such a time when the popularity of internet-based platforms for news and information was growing among audiences across the globe, cutting people's dependency on legacy media for news and information. Whenever a new medium steps into the domain of media, as Lee (2008, p. 1) argues, a fear of the "displacement effects" of that new medium over the existing ones arises. The key logic behind this fear is the limited time that audiences have for media consumption in their daily routine. It is argued that audiences may not give a similar amount of time to all media daily (Lee, 2008). Against these realities, this paper investigates

the trend of return of subscribers who unsubscribed print newspapers in their households during the pandemic. It attempts to explore the reasons that discouraged people from resubscribing to print newspapers following the improvement of the COVID-19 situation in Bangladesh. It further examines the alternative sources of news that readers of print dailies started following in the absence of print newspapers at their places during the pandemic. Specifically, this study seeks answers to the following Research Questions (RQ).

RQ1: Which factors played a determining role behind readers' decision not to resubscribe print dailies as the COVID-19 situation improved?

RQ2: To what extent did digital platforms meet the demand of print newspaper readers for news and information?

RQ3: How does this group of readers evaluate their new news consumption habits?

RQ4: How does this group of readers foresee the future of print newspapers in Bangladesh?

Literature Review

Journey of News Organizations under COVID-19

As of October 2022, 1,279 registered print dailies were operational in Bangladesh. Of them, 504 were published from the capital, Dhaka, and the rest were published from other parts of the country (Department of Film and Publications, 2022). Thirty-four television channels, 22 FM radios, and 17 community radios were operational in Bangladesh as of 2020 (Yasmin, 2020). Many local newspapers faced acute financial constraints as advertisements to those organizations dropped by 70-80 per cent during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, 1,010 journalists from 191 media houses contracted the COVID-19 virus as of November 2020. Of them, 35 died after their illness (Mondol and Paul, 2021). According to the results of a survey, 275 out of 456 local newspapers in Bangladesh suspended their operations within several months of the break of COVID-19 because of their financial constraints ("Coronakale Bondho Hoye", 2020). Only seven Bangla and four English-language newspapers, published from the capital Dhaka, managed to pay wages regularly to its journalists till July 2020 (Sharifuzzaman, 2020).

There was no difference in the global media picture. Over 36,000 journalists in the United States of America (USA) were either dismissed or experienced pay cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Radcliffe, 2020). Over 200 media organizations in the USA followed "cost-saving measures" that included "mergers and reduced print runs" to cope with financial problems that arose with the pandemic (Hare in Radcliffe, 2020). In the USA, community newspapers changed their business model to survive the

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economic crisis following a sharp decline in advertising revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the changed strategies, newspapers accepted government funding, public donations, and grants to continue publishing the papers (Finneman et al., 2023). The Indonesian Press Council demanded incentives from the government for newspapers to help them survive the COVID-19-associated financial constraints (Supadiyanto, 2020). Jadhav (2020) found that the print newspaper business went through a massive recession in India during the COVID-19 crisis. The advertising revenue of newspapers almost stagnated while the lockdown disrupted the distribution of newspaper copies, hampering revenue earned from the sale of newspapers (Jadhav, 2020). Many newspaper journalists in India were dismissed from their jobs or paid less than their regular salaries. Some newspapers suspended their regular publications. Journalists of web and electronic media outlets were also terminated during the COVID-19 crisis (Jadhav, 2020). On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis, as Casero-Ripolles (2020) argue, restored the influence of legacy media, particularly television, to an extent, and it "reconnected" people to news, especially those who generally do not follow information. Papadopoulou and Theodora (2021) found that the pandemic brought in fresh dimensions to the existing challenges to freedom of the press. The powerful actors including the state, on many occasions, used the COVID-19 crisis "as a pretext to silence critical journalism" (Papadopoulou and Theodora, 2021). While shading lights on virtual newsroom operations during pandemic days, Garcia-Aviles (2021) opines that communication among journalists in cyberspace reshaped their existing relationships and improved "collaboration, shaping news practices and communication protocols" (Garcia-Aviles, 2021).

History and Influence of Newspapers

Newspapers have been an influential medium of mass communication for decades, meeting people's demands for information, news, and knowledge. A factor that played a crucial role behind the introduction of newspapers was the sense people had that newspaper was an emblem of a community (Anderson et al., 2016). At least until the advent of television and the internet, newspapers had a continuous influence on people's lives. This medium has played an indispensable role in building an informed citizenry. Due to low prices, people from all walks of life can afford newspapers that offer news, features, photo features, statistics, editorials, opinions, and so on. The newspapers may assist in shaping public thoughts and create forums for public discussion and debate. It has been regarded as a major tool of democracy and a bridge between the government and the people. The first periodical news sheet came to market in 1605 in Strassburg, Germany (Weber, 2006). The first English newspaper was published in Amsterdam in 1620 (Anderson et al., 2016). A variety of newspapers became available in central Europe in the 1620s. In the second half of the 17th century, newspapers were the most widely read secular material

(Weber, 2006). According to Park (1923, p. 273), newspapers became a product of city life, and the growth of circulation of newspapers made this medium an "independent [news] enterprise, an envelope, and carrier for advertising".

The British era marked the inception of newspapers in Bangladesh. Hickey's Bengal Gazette or the original Calcutta General Advertiser was the first newspaper published in India by James Augustus Hickey in 1780 (Dhar, 1985). The first newspaper under Bengali ownership was the Bengal Gazette. It was brought out in 1818 by Gangakishore Bhattacharya (Roy, 1994). During the 1971 War of Liberation of Bangladesh, newspapers played a vital role in drawing the attention of the country's citizens as well as the outside world to the homicide done by the Pakistani army on the people of Bangladesh.

Challenges for Print Newspapers in the 21st Century

The challenges for print newspapers have been manifold in the 21st century. It has already become an issue of discussion whether print newspapers will disappear or thrive in the future. Academic Philip Meyer has meanwhile forecasted that the last newspaper will be printed in 2043 (Anderson et al., 2016). People now do not need to wait for the next day morning for news. Instead, there are myriad ways for people to acquire daily information, thanks to the advancement of communication technologies and the internet. People can now find news regularly from television channels and internet-based news portals. The presence of news organizations on social media platforms is dominant too. Here, one can share her or his opinions and perspectives in the comment sections under every news, and the readers can receive feedback from online-based news sources more frequently than newspapers and any other forms of legacy media. The concept of multimedia journalism has already brought a new dimension to news for audiences. Some empirical data are evident that newspaper reading is gradually declining. The readership of newspapers, as Dominick (2017) finds, is falling gradually. Furthermore, Bigai (2003) mentions that the number of newspapers has been decreasing because of "non-readership" since the 1970s. The industry of print newspapers has become more precarious than ever before. Newspaper organizations are starting their online platforms to attract readers and advertisers to secure their survival. Against these backdrops, some newspapers have shifted their focus to building a digital subscription model.

Theoretical Framework

This paper consulted two theories -- displacement theory, and the theory of media habits as its theoretical framework to examine the phenomenon of quitting the habit of subscribing and reading print newspapers by the readers. The displacement theory says it becomes difficult for people to perform "social and professional activities offline" due to their involvement with diverse tasks on internet-based platforms (Tokunaga, 2016, p. 345). It

is argued that two factors play a role in this displacement trend – time and function (Lee, 2008). The audiences, at least according to Robinson (cited in Lee, 2008), spend less time on radio if they spend more time on television. Similarly, television views declined when people chose to go online (Kayany and Yelsma cited in Lee, 2008). In terms of function, at least according to Himmelweit et al., Schramm, and DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, a new medium displaces the existing ones when the newcomer delivers "better" also in a "more effective manner" (Lee, 2008, p. 2). The trend of shifting of readers to digital news platforms from print dailies is propelled, according to Lee (2008, p. 2), by the features and scopes that include – "interconnectivity, multifarious information sources, hyperlinks, and instantaneity" – of the internet-based mediums. The presence of news organizations on social media eased the process of shifting of print newspaper readers to digital platforms for news and information during the pandemic days.

The media habits notion argues that the amount of time people spend on the internet is connected to their habits of internet usage (Tokunaga, 2016). Internet habits are developed following people's "inability" to "control" their individual practices of internet usage that expand people's "cognitive resources necessary for conscious media selection" (LaRose in Tokunaga, 2016, p. 345). The practices of internet use and internet habits are "reciprocal in nature" (LaRose in Tokunaga, 2016, p. 345). Media habits, according to LaRose and Takunaga, become dominant as internal and external factors set an "internet routine that ends in some reward" (Tokunaga, 2016, p. 443). In addition, a reiteration of a certain task can speed up the development of a particular media habit (Bayley cited in Tokunaga, 2016) that progresses following a goal (LaRose, 2010). Over half of all media behaviors, as Wood, Quinn, and Kashy (cited in LaRose, 2010, p. 194) find, are "habitual". Media habits, according to LaRose (2010, p. 217), are linked to "automaticity in media consumption" that develops following people's "repeat media consumption behavior in stable circumstances". Dependency of people on the internet and digital devices increased globally during the COVID-19 pandemic which influenced people's internet habits also media consumption habits.

Methods

The method of in-depth interview was followed in this study to collect data from the field. In-depth interviewing is a popular standard technique for collecting data in qualitative studies because of the flexibility of the process (Bryman, 2008) which accommodates a small number of samples, and discrete answers, and facilitates scopes for a thorough background (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). In-depth interviews, according to Charmaz and Belgrave (2012), further assist in examining institutional change and professional strategy. The authors conducted interviews with 12 persons, living in and around Dhaka city, who quit their habit of reading print dailies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 12 interviewees, six were males

and six were females. All interviewees, aged 30 to 40, came from seven different professions including teacher, journalist, financial analyst, farmer, housewife, and entrepreneur. All interviewees were university graduates, and they belonged to middle-class families.

A semi-structured questionnaire was followed while conducting the interviews online also in May 2022. The semi-structured questionnaire, according to Bryman (2008, p. 471), is preferred in qualitative research as it allows a researcher to ask questions, following an interviewee's responses, from outside the list, and ensures "a great deal of leeway" for an interviewee in how to respond. The authors of this paper asked questions to interviewees covering a range of areas that included the habit of newspaper reading; reasons for quitting reading print dailies; new sources of information; satisfaction; and the future of print newspapers. The interviewees were selected following the purposive sampling method that encouraged the selection of samples to meet "specific characteristics or qualities" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 94). Three themes were generated from the interview data following the basic categorization technique to present the findings and put forward the discussion. While the first theme -- fear of infection of COVID-19 drove papers away, new habits precluded it from coming back -- answers RQ1, the second one -- satisfied with digital platforms, yet passion for print papers survives – responds to RQ2 and RQ3. The third theme – future of print newspapers: worries there, hope too – answers RQ4.

Findings

Fear of Infection of COVID-19 Drove Papers Away, New Habits Precluded it from Coming Back

The fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus, either through paper or getting in touch with newspaper hawkers, forced the subscribers of print dailies to stop purchasing papers at their households, quickly after the beginning of the countrywide shutdown in March 2020. Even though the average length of the habit of reading print newspapers of the interviewees was over 20 years, they decided not to welcome copies of print dailies to their homes, considering the safety of themselves as well as their family members, especially the elder ones. As an interviewee who has been working as a reporter for a Dhaka-based television channel for over 15 years was saying:

"I did not want to bring any outside substance including newspaper into our house as they could be the carrier of coronavirus. I wanted to ensure my aged father does not get infected with COVID-19 from any source. My father has been a regular reader of print newspapers for years and it was hard for him to pass days without reading newspapers. However, we had to stop purchasing newspapers for our home on the ground of the safety."

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Although the decision of the subscribers of not to welcome print newspapers to their households was taken in a pandemic situation, the interviewees said they were influenced by a message that identified newspapers as a potential source of transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Though the interviewees were initially not sure about the rationality of the message, they believed that they learnt it either from mainstream media or social media. An interviewee who works as a financial analyst in a Dhaka-based private bank said:

"I learned from web-based sources that copies of print newspapers could be a source of transmission of the COVID-19 virus. I was not entirely sure about this information, but I could not ignore it too. In fact, I am still not clear about it. In addition, we did not want a newspaper hawker to reach our door every morning with a paper."

The amount of internet usage by the interviewees increased during the pandemic days. They used the internet for multiple purposes, from browsing news portals and social media platforms to doing personal and official communications. A 36-year-old interviewee who became a reader of print newspapers in his childhood said he became a heavy user of social media at the beginning of the pandemic. In this process, he started finding information for him from social media. His level of consumption of news on free online news portals increased too during the pandemic days. As he was saying:

"I found alternatives to print newspapers, and I gradually adapted myself to reading news on online platforms of news organizations. In this new habit, I hardly felt that I missed important national and international news. I am now accustomed to finding news on internet-based sources."

Almost a similar opinion came from another interviewee who is a full-time faculty at a public university in Bangladesh. She said she and other adult members of her family became familiar with the process of reading news on free online news portals during the pandemic days.

"I developed a habit of reading news on online news portals during the pandemic days. And, I have already become used to it. Now, I know how to find news quickly from online sources."

Satisfied with Digital Platforms, Yet Passion for Print Papers Survives

A certain level of satisfaction was noticed among the interviewees, at least in terms of finding news and information, over the use of digital platforms during the pandemic. Two factors were predominantly present behind this gratification. According to the interviewees, they could access information sources, mainly online news portals and social media pages of news organizations, anytime and from anywhere using their mobile phones and other portable devices. This opportunity helped them grow a habit of

consuming information and news on digital platforms, breaking the bar of time and space. As an interviewee said:

"I can access the same contents on an e-paper. Also, I can read e-papers on my smartphone whenever I want. So, I think going digital is more convenient."

Almost a similar notion was shared by a housewife interviewee who spends most of her time taking care of her two children. As she was saying:

"I can barely manage time now to sit idle with a print newspaper. Instead, I browse through the internet for news on my mobile phone or watch news tickers on television channels whenever I find some free time."

Another factor that discouraged several interviewees from resubscribing print dailies for their houses was the cost of print newspapers. In Bangladesh, almost every popular newspaper and television station has dedicated online news portals which are free. Only one national daily does charge a fee for accessing its e-paper version which is way too low than the price of its print version. Several interviewees think that reading news online is much cheaper than subscribing to print newspapers for news and information. In addition, news organizations release news on their social media pages, especially on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, regularly which audiences can access without spending their money. As an interviewee who owns a cattle farm near Dhaka said:

"Before the pandemic, I was a subscriber of print copies of two national dailies, and I had to pay Tk 12,000 (\$130) in a year as a subscription fee for these two newspapers. Now, I pay Tk 400 (\$4.30) only for subscribing to the e-paper of one of the dailies for a year. The e-paper version of other newspapers is free. So, reading e-paper is economically viable too."

However, the interviewees showed a strong passion for reading print newspapers. Though they no longer subscribe to print dailies for their households, they cherish their long-time habit of reading print newspapers. As another housewife interviewee was saying:

"It feels like I am missing some important news [on digital platforms]. It does not feel complete to read news on online platforms. There is a question of contentment too. The taste of reading a print paper is lost while I read the news on my smartphone. Instantly, it gives me a machine-like artificial feeling."

A journalist interviewee also shared a similar thought. As he said:

"I am quite familiar with the way news is arranged in a print newspaper. Scanning and finding news on a print paper is

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easier than locating news on digital platforms. Besides, reading e-papers on smartphones is not convenient for the eyes. I face difficulties in reading e-papers on my phone. Sometimes, I miss important news on an e-paper."

Future of Print Newspapers: Worries There, Hope Too

The interviewees have given a mixed reaction about the future of print newspapers in Bangladesh. While several interviewees foresee a positive future for print papers, others believe this form of mass media will struggle to survive in the future. An interviewee who teaches International Relations at a university thinks that factors like the birth of new readers, multi-purpose usage of copies of print newspapers, and the existence of common platforms such as educational institutions, offices, libraries, and tea stalls will ensure a positive future for print newspapers in Bangladesh. A journalist interviewee opines that the appeal of print newspapers will not fade away soon because of its features which offer comfort to readers while reading news in it. An interviewee who teaches communication and journalism at a university thinks the market for print newspapers will shrink in Bangladesh in the coming days, but it will not disappear.

Some interviewees stressed the need to concentrate on the contents of print newspapers to fulfil the demands of modern-day subscribers. As an interviewee who is an entrepreneur said:

"Print newspapers need to evolve on a regular basis to survive taking the demands of their readers into account. They need to bring variations and dimensions to their papers by doing research and analysis. Print papers should build a bridge between readers of digital platforms and print copies, and they should target both groups of readers for their survival."

On the contrary, some interviewees think that a dark future is looming for print newspapers in Bangladesh since people, especially the youth, are becoming more comfortable on the internet with digital devices than ever before in finding required information and news. They think people will gradually learn to live without reading print newspapers in the future. As a housewife interviewee said:

"Young people are not into reading print copies of newspapers. They seem to be content with online platforms as their sources of news and information. I think print newspapers will disappear from Bangladesh's news industry within the next 20 years."

Another interviewee predicts that circulation of print dailies will drop on a regular basis in the future but this medium will never be non-existent altogether as a group of people, especially aged ones, will prefer reading print newspapers over online news portals.

Discussion & Conclusion

According to Schoenbach et al. (1999, p. 225), the print newspapers have become an "endangered species". Since the beginning of the 1970s, the circulation of print newspapers has declined everywhere in the world, except in some third-world or "threshold" countries (Schoenbach et al., 1999, p. 76). Over the years, print newspapers have been hit by several crises, including global recession, domestic setbacks, and inflation. The latest thwack in the list for print newspapers was probably the financial crisis and the loss of readers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past 15 years, more than one in five newspapers in the United States has shuttered, and the number of journalists working for newspapers has been cut in half (Takenaga, 2019). The prominent print dailies in Bangladesh are gradually concentrating more on internet-based platforms to reach the growing online-platform-based audiences, thus surviving in the challenging media economics context.

Since readers are the driving strength for print newspapers, a decline in the readership of print copies of papers is a concern for the entire newspaper industry, especially in contexts of survival and revenue generation. Arguably, reading print dailies is a habit that people of this country have been following for years. The contents of print newspapers still become the topics of discussion in public gatherings and meetings with friends and family members. Apart from hurting the print newspaper industry financially, the COVID-19 pandemic left a long-time impact on print newspapers which was the decline of subscribers of papers. Since a certain group of subscribers of print dailies quit purchasing print papers in their households and become used to or developed a habit of reading news on online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, print newspapers may need to come up with new ideas to get those subscribers back. This study understands that a longtime habit of reading print newspapers may change if a person continues reading news on online news-based platforms or consumes news in other forms of mass media. This paper also finds that the new habit of reading news on digital platforms during COVID-19 has created an invisible bar to the path of the return of print newspapers to people's households every morning. Despite the fact that people, who have been readers of print newspapers for years, hold a strong passion and love for print papers, they were unsure, at least up until May 2022, whether or not they would restart their pre-COVID-19 practice of subscribing to print newspapers at their households. This is what adds a level of worry to the already existing threats to print newspapers regarding their survival in this digital era. This paper argues that print newspapers in Bangladesh will face difficulties, at least in terms of holding readers, in the days ahead as people, especially educated youths, are gradually becoming accustomed to reading news on digital platforms. However, as this study understands, the affection of a certain group of people towards the print copies of newspapers will be there for a long time too due to the unique features of print newspapers.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the size of the interview samples is small to reach a conclusive argument regarding any decision taken by the subscribers of print newspapers. Secondly, the phenomenon of not resubscribing print newspapers for households by readers was analyzed based on data collected through interviews conducted in a single month – in May 2022. The authors did not get back to those interviewees sometime after that to observe whether they returned to their original positions of being subscribers of print dailies. Thirdly, the data were collected from 12 city dwellers, based in and around Dhaka city, leaving the subscribers of print papers from other parts of the country, especially in villages, aside.

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