

# A critical review of the opportunities and obstacles of online journalism in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

*The establishment of online journalism in Bangladesh has transformed the country's media environment, opened doors for effective news dissemination, and presented new challenges. The paper analyses the growth, challenges, and future of digital journalism in Bangladesh, emphasizing its potential in democratizing information, the role of audience engagement, regulatory environment challenges, and ethical dilemmas. However, this broadening comes with its pressing challenges, including government censorship under laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA) for the proliferation of misinformation, economic vulnerability of digital platforms, and ethical compromises in reporting. Using a mixed-method approach combining content analysis, interviews with journalists and secondary data, the paper illustrates a transition of public discourse through online journalism in Bangladesh. These results underscore that while digital media provides a broader reach and faster reporting times, sustainability is a concern given the challenges of political pressure. It ends with recommendations related to policies, including legal measures to preserve press freedom, public media literacy programs to counteract fake news, and business innovation to guarantee online journalism's sustainability in the future. In overcoming these challenges, Bangladesh can unlock the potential of digital media as a facilitator of democratic engagement and an enabler of informed citizenship.*

*Keywords: Online journalism, Bangladesh, digital media, press freedom, misinformation, media sustainability*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

By engaging with the study of previous research in journalism, this paper investigates the nature of digital journalism in the Bangladesh context. It outlines some of the effects that are attributed to this transformative power. This transition to digital platforms is a technological shift and a paradigm shift in the country's information ecosystem. With internet penetration expanding to 130 million internet users in 2024, online news platforms are now the prime source of information for an increasingly interconnected Bangladesh, especially among younger audiences. The origin of online journalism in Bangladesh dates back to the early 2000s when pioneering platforms like BDNews24 and Prothom Alo Online were making experimental works. A handful of early adopters also showed the promise of internet-based journalism in a country where traditional media had been king for decades (Hirst, 2020). This transition was hastened by the subsequent diffusion of smartphones

and cheap mobile data packages, which made digital news consumption easy and, for many Bengalis, the most accessible form of news consumption. A 2023 study found that 72% of urban youth prefer online news sources over traditional media, showing that the trend is understandable in the context of a new generation of media consumption (Chowdhury et al.).

In addition, digitalization has been a blessing for Bangladesh's media landscape. Online journalism brings access to information to the fingertips of the public, breaking down the wall where only media houses with strong financial power could produce the news. Citizen journalism and independent digital media have provided new avenues for voices often excluded from mainstream media narratives (Dreher, 2012). Digital platform investigative journalism initiatives such as Netra News and Mukto Mona have shown the power of digital platforms to hold power accountable, uncovering corruption and human rights abuses stories that would not have been told otherwise. In addition, the multimedia domains of digital platforms have opened avenues for more engaging and immersive storytelling styles through video, audio and interactive elements that collectively enrich audience understanding and engagement (Walmsley, 2016).

However, the expansion of online journalism in Bangladesh has also presented substantial challenges. Several threats to the sector undermine its promise as a powerful venue for democratic conversation. The widespread use of government censorship, primarily through laws like the DSA and ICT Act, has fostered a culture of fear and self-censorship among journalists (Khan & Islam, 2022). However, the rise of misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms has undermined public trust in online news sources and confused the audience (Abiri & Buchheim, 2022). Financial sustainability is a pressing issue, as numerous digital outlets fail to establish viable business models in a landscape where advertising monies are no longer enough, and audiences have proved unwilling to pay for content (Evans, 2009). The competitive digital environment has further led to concerns about lowering journalistic standards and ethical practices due to the pressure to fill news quotas quickly (Keeble, 2008).

Therefore, the importance of this research lies in examining a media sector in transition. The research fits into the context of democratization, highlighting how online journalism can shape Bangladesh's media landscape amidst its digital transformation and presenting a case study for policymakers, media professionals, and civil society actors interested in fostering a more robust information ecosystem. Finally, the study maintains that although these possibilities exist, full realization would require structural, legal, and economic intervention in the context of Bangladesh to take the most advantage of the potential of democratic discourse on digital platforms.

## 2.0 EVOLUTION OF ONLINE JOURNALISM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's online journalism has transformed from simple digitized versions of print newspapers in the 1990s to spirited multimedia outlets today. The sector's growth increased by 130 million users in 2024, which elevated internet access (BTRC, 2024) and the number of smartphone users. Cutting-edge news aggregators such as BDNews24 shifted from print to videos, podcasts, and interactive graphics. Social media integration into news came into force after 2010, leading Facebook to become a top-three news source for about 60% of its users (BIID, 2023). This digital transition allowed for real-time reporting but brought challenges, including misinformation and sustainability issues influencing the industry's course.

### List of leading online portals in Bangladesh

Portal / Website	Online launch	Language(s)	Notes / source
The Daily Star thedailystar.net	1997 (website launched in late-1990s; archive shows early 2000s content).	English (also bilingual since 2021)	One of the earliest Bangladeshi mainstream papers to put content online.
Prothom Alo prothomalo.com	2006 (online presence / e-paper and portal ramp from 2006 per org materials).	Bangla & English	Largest Bangla news website; company history states online journey began in 2006.
bdnews24 bdnews24.com	2006 (relaunched Oct 2006 as a 24/7 internet news publisher).	English & Bangla	Frequently cited as Bangladesh's first 24/7 internet news publisher after its 2006 relaunch.
Jugantor jugantor.com	2000 (print launched 1 Feb 2000; online portal followed early-2000s as Jugantor Online).	Bangla	Major national daily with an online portal.
New Age newagebd.net	2003 (paper founded 2003; online edition in parallel since early 2000s).	English	English-language daily with an active online site and archives.
Kaler Kantho kalerkantho.com	2010 (paper launched Jan 2010; online portal active since the paper's start).	Bangla	Daily print (2010) and online portal operated by East West Media Group.
Dhaka Tribune dhakatribune.com / banglatribune.com (sister)	2013 (Dhaka Tribune founded 2013; Bangla Tribune launched 2014).	English (Dhaka Tribune) / Bangla (Bangla Tribune)	Both are part of 2A Media / Gemcon group; Bangla Tribune started 2014.
Bangla Tribune banglatribune.com	2014 (launched 13 May 2014).	Bangla	Digital-first Bengali news portal (sister to Dhaka Tribune).
The Daily Ittefaq ittefaq.com.bd / e-paper	Online e-paper / portal available (site active; long print history). Exact website start year not always documented publicly (online presence from 2000s onward).	Bangla	Oldest newspapers with e-paper/online site; specific early web launch year not clearly documented on main About pages.
Janakantha dailyjanakantha.com (e-paper / portal)	Print 1993; online/e-paper presence documented (online archive active); precise web-launch year commonly in 2000s.	Bangla	National daily with e-paper/online service.

Source: Compiled by the author from the above news portals

## 2.1 Early beginnings and growth

Online journalism in Bangladesh emerged in the late 1990s, when some newspapers started experimenting with digital editions. For making this transition possible, Prothom Alo, one of the notable Bengali dailies of the country, already brought out its online version in 1998. In the early 2000s, dedicated online news portals emerged, such as BDNews24 (launched in 2006), which pioneered 24/7-reports online. Initially, these platforms were mere extensions to print media, but they soon transitioned into news sources based on the internet's immediacy and interactivity. In 2000, internet penetration was as little as 0.3% of the population, whereas, in 2015, it rose to over 30% (BTRC, 2024), giving rise to online journalism. The launch of 3 G and subsequently 4G services propelled accessibility to a new high, allowing news updates to reach readers in real-time and facilitating multimedia news reporting. In this era, Bangladesh's vibrant digital media ecosystem took root, which would later cement the country's place as a world leader in news consumption.

## 2.2 The smartphone and social media boom

Bangladesh's transformation of its media landscape is a unique case, but without the widespread adoption of smartphones and the growth of social media, engaging in online journalism would have proven much more difficult. From as low as 15% in 2015, by 2024, more than half the population, over 50%, had access to smartphones (BTRC, 2024), paving the way for digital news access on a large scale. Social media channels, most notably Facebook, which has 45 million Bangladeshi users (Meta, 2023), emerged as dominant gateways for news, altering consumption habits. This boom democratized content creation, enabling citizen journalists and independent news outlets to circumvent traditional gatekeepers. However, it also brought about challenges such as misinformation, where stories of misinformation spread as a virus (Mian & Khan, 2020). News organizations shifted their websites to be mobile first, made their articles social-friendly, and turned to new multimedia formats to capture an audience.

## 2.3 Shift in audience preferences

Where traditional news media, visual and print, were once the bastion of media consumers in Bangladesh, younger demographics have witnessed significant movement from this old model to more modern digital ones. According to a 2023 study conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of ICT in Development (BIID), 78% of participants aged between 18 and 35 primarily received their news through online portals and social media, and over 22% received it from print newspapers. This preference is partly due to the real-time updates (62%), multimedia content (54%), and interactive features (48%) that digital platforms offer (BIID, 2023). Mobile accessibility is a game changer - 85% of digital news readers use smart devices (BTRC, 2024). Snackable content (short videos, infographics) is gaining popularity among audiences while long-form articles are gradually being ignored, with 67% of people consuming more visual news formats. Consequently, traditional media have been forced to embrace digital-first approaches. At the same time, emerging entities such as the online edition of The Daily Star have risen to prominence by aligning their strategies with these changing habits through responsive designs and personalized content delivery.

### 3.0 OPPORTUNITIES IN ONLINE JOURNALISM

These new online journalism trends in Bangladesh have had immense transformative potential for news production that has been democratized, allowing citizen journalists and independent voices to produce news content (Kaufhold et al., 2010). Such digital platform quality allows for real-time reporting in crisis scenarios and interactive engagement in comments/live chats (O’Leary, 2022). Being based in a significant city contributes to multimedia storytelling for greater audience understanding (video explainers and data maps) and global reach for diaspora communities. Emerging technologies such as AI-driven personalization and mobile journalism expand the range of content creation and delivery. Most importantly, digital spaces create opportunities for reporting sensitive issues that conventional media frequently neglect (Tasleem et al., 2024), facilitating accountability. However, realizing this potential will depend on overcoming monetization and ethical challenges.

#### 3.1 Democratization of news

A counter-intuitive narrative of how low-barrier online journalism has advanced in Bangladesh and what this means for news a decade later. Diffusion of the news to the people is now easier as digital platforms, unlike conventional outlets whose participation is limited by printing costs and a broadcast license, have enabled diverse voices—citizen journalists, grassroots and independent media collectives, etc.—to join news ecologies overall (Gillmor, 2004). Marginalized communities, for example, circumvent editorial gatekeeping by deploying platforms like Facebook Live and YouTube to document human rights violations (Wallace, 2018). It provides critical perspectives often missing from mainstream news outlets, especially surrounding governance and minority issues, through alternative news portals such as Mukto Mona and Bangla Tribune. A 2023 study found that 41% of Bangladeshis trust independent online sources over state-aligned media regarding sensitive topics (TIB, 2023). However, this democratization also deepens problems such as content verification and polarization.

#### 3.2 Real-time reporting and engagement

The emergence of online journalism has transformed the way news is disseminated in Bangladesh, with real-time reporting and an interactive audience. Digital platforms facilitate instantaneous reporting of breaking news; during the political rallies in 2023, updates from protest sites were delivered to millions through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). This immediacy was vital during crises like the 2022 floods, where real-time warnings and relief coordination ensured lives. On the other hand, digitization has brought greater interactivity to journalism, creating a new engagement. Today, 68% of Bangladeshi news consumers regularly comment on or share stories. News portals are already institutionalizing these through live blogs during significant events, Q&A sessions with reporters, polls, and crowd-sourced investigations (Alam & Kim, 2021).

### 3.3 Multimedia and innovative storytelling

Bangladesh online journalism has been using multimedia storytelling to engage the audience and help them understand the events better. Top news organizations such as Prothom Alo Digital and The Daily Star Online have started using interactive infographics, 360-degree videos, and data visualizations in coverage of complex issues such as climate change and its impacts. Bdnews24, in the 2023 elections, effectively infused scroll-telling formats through candidate profiles and constituency maps, driving average reading time up by 40% (BIID, 2023). Moreover, podcasts have become an impactful medium, with programs like BBC Bengali's investigative show reaching rural audiences via WhatsApp sharing. Young journalists are applying mobile journalism (mojo) methods, creating social issue documentaries via smartphone, a format that accounts for 35% of all digital content. Resource constraints prevent smaller outlets from incorporating these innovations, creating a digital divide that impacts the quality of storytelling (Burum, 2016).

### 3.4 Global reach and diaspora engagement

As the diaspora communities found solace in the global platform of Bangladeshi online journalism, they also became a key part of this audience and contributed to globalization. According to BIID 2023, expatriates are responsible for 32% of the total traffic for large Bangla portals, like Bangla Tribune and Dhaka Tribune, thus creating an appetite for dual-language (English/Bangla) and diaspora-focused news content. For instance, using WhatsApp newsletters, the platform "Probashir Kotha" targets laborers in the Middle East (Batra, 2016). During crises such as the 2022 protests by workers in Lebanon, these channels allowed for real-time coordination between activists in the diaspora and newsrooms in the country. Social media connects people and places 68% of Bangladeshis in the UK keep up with local events through Facebook groups.

## 4.0 OBSTACLES FACING ONLINE JOURNALISM

However, as much as online journalism in Bangladesh has developed, it faces severe challenges. The press loses its freedom due to government censorship through laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA). Social media further compounds the problem of misinformation, eroding credibility. 68% of Bangladeshis read fake news weekly (Haque et al., 2020). Over 60% of the digital outlets remain at a loss because of low ad revenue (BIID, 2023), and financial sustainability remains speculative. Moreover, partisan ownership and ethical compromises put editorial independence at risk. Such systemic issues threaten the sector's potential as a democratic watchdog while adding risks for journalists, especially those reporting on politics or human rights.

### 4.1 Government censorship and legal pressures

Press freedom in Bangladesh is severely limited due to increasingly rigid legal structures governing the digital media space. The DSA, enacted in 2018, has been the authorities' go-to law for stifling independent journalism. It has been used against journalists in 247 cases since its inception, including 43 documented arrests in just 2022. Its deliberately vague provisions, especially regarding "defamation" and "propaganda,"

have been systematically abused to punish investigative journalism about sensitive issues, including government corruption and human rights violations (Islam & Syed, 2024).

Therefore, the strategy goes far beyond the legal, including various measures to control online media. This has included the systematic blocking of 210 news websites since 2020, economic pressure via advertising restrictions that hit critical outlets, and sophisticated digital surveillance operations against journalists. In its recent passage of the 2023 Cyber Security Act, which supplants the DSA, the government's introduction has preserved its most egregious features, while inserting broad, loosely defined phrases about “fake news” that expand the grounds for abuse. This stifling legal climate has led to widespread self-censorship in Bangladesh’s media sector, with 62% of journalists now stating that they intentionally refrain from covering sensitive topics due to fear of backlash. The cumulative effect of these measures has ruthlessly curtailed the capacity of online journalists to perform their watchdog function in Bangladesh's democracy.

#### **4.2 Misinformation and fake news**

Unfortunately, the swift development of online journalism in Bangladesh has been paralleled by filling this space with dangerous misinformation, itself fueled by the unregulated nature of social media and politically biased agendas. Recent studies suggest that Bangladeshi internet users are exposed to fake news weekly, with political content especially prone to distortion. The situation has deteriorated to the extent that slick deep fake video footage of politicians and digitally modified images of protests have led to real-world violence, including the 2021 communal riots that were triggered by fake social media posts.

Several key issues are driving this deepening crisis. The first is that the competitive digital media model has driven native local news portals to reward speed of publication over factual accuracy, often at the cost of proper fact-checking: More than half do so. Second, there are disturbing reports of state-affiliated entities methodically spreading propaganda through coordinated online campaigns. Third and perhaps most alarming is the lack of resources for fact-checking dedicated verification projects for the country. Although organizations such as Boom Bangladesh and FactWatch are doing great work by undertaking verification efforts to fight misinformation, they have limited reach and funding to make a wider impact in society. However, media professionals and scholars admonish that, in the absence of widespread digital media literacy programs among the general population and demands for accountability for social media platforms, the degradation of trust in digital journalism will continue unopposed, undermining Bangladesh’s information ecosystem and democratic processes.

#### **4.3 Financial sustainability**

One of the significant challenges for online journalism in Bangladesh is financial sustainability. According to BIID’s 2023 report, 72% of digital news outlets operate unprofitably. The industry is presented with competing revenue challenges. Digital advertisement rates remain among the lowest in Asia at just \$0.50 CPM (Fung &

Chik, 2021) on one hand, while Facebook algorithm modifications can lead to a halving of traffic-based income, with a 60% drop reported explicitly in 2022 (Meta, 2023). At the same time, subscription models are complex here, with barely 5% of Bangladeshis paying for online news (Rahman, 2024). Many outlets are ever more dependent on partisan sponsorships or branded content, a compromise that jeopardizes editorial independence. Although some large print media have established micropayment systems, the mainly cash-based media consumption presents adoption hurdles, given the country's digital payment infrastructure and literacy constraints (Putrevu & Mertzanis, 2024). Removed from the protection of diversified revenue streams, through memberships, events or grants, the financial viability of good digital journalism is increasingly tenuous, effectively holding the commercial development of the capital in servitude to the growth needs of such digital editorial, risking imbalance of the completed narrative.

#### 4.4 Ethical challenges

Bangladesh's online journalism landscape has growing ethical challenges as competitive pressures rise. Of the 58% of journalists who admitted to publishing unverified news to surpass competitors, many digital outlets publish content that is more quickly produced than accurately (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2008). The phenomenon of "paid news" is particularly alarming, with politicians and businesses paying off journalists to write flattering articles without disclosing it. The ethical quandaries for journalists of balancing truth-telling with self-censorship in the face of legal threats, where 31% of content is copied without proper attribution (Kurambayev, 2020). Though some outlets have implemented ethics codes, few hold journalists accountable effectively. Such issues undermine public confidence, with just 39% of Bangladeshis deeming online news trustworthy (BIID, 2023). Finally, enhancing professional standards and accountability mechanisms is essential for the sector's credibility.

#### 5.0 ONLINE JOURNALISM IN PRACTICE

Prothom Alo Online, the online edition of Bangladesh's leading Bengali newspaper, illustrates how traditional media can transition successfully into the digital space. Founded in 1998, it now receives more than 25 million monthly visitors. It has succeeded by employing various platforms, websites, apps and social media, experimenting with revenue streams, including subscriptions and sponsored content, and adapting new formats, including data journalism and podcasts. However, it struggles with challenges such as government pressure. Its editor was charged under the Digital Security Act in 2023, and competition from partisan news sites.

*Case one:* Netra News is an investigative website founded by the exiled journalist Tasneem Khalil, who is now based in Sweden for security reasons. It specializes in corruption and human rights stories, employing secure channels for whistleblowers to leak information and collaborating with international media such as The Guardian. The bulk of its funding comes from donations by Bangladeshis who live abroad. It did break important stories like those about the Pegasus spyware's use in Bangladesh, but the government has blocked access to its website in Bangladesh. *Case two:* Jamuna TV's digital presence did initially well with its live talk

shows and breaking news coverage. However, it closed shop in 2022 primarily because it relied heavily on advertising (which plummeted after COVID) and caved to government pressure to remove unflattering articles. It underscores how dangerous news sites are for going all in on ads, especially if they are under political siege.

*Case three:* If you want to know why you are calling, you should also know the name of Boom Bangladesh, the organization that controls the fact. It employs technology to identify fake videos and images and conducts educational programs that teach people how to spot information that is not true. However, it struggles to receive sufficient funding, and many remain unaware of its work. *Case four:* Bangladesh's top English-language news site has remained relatively independent but struggles. Moreover, some critics say it clears sensitive topics to safeguard its business interests. It also hemorrhages younger readers, who would rather watch news videos than read articles. These numbers show that although innovation and trustworthiness help online news sites succeed, they still struggle with enormous challenges, including financial instability, government censorship and ethical quandaries. To survive in the long term, they need diversified sources of revenue, audience trust, and protections for press freedom.

## 6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Some key actions might strengthen online journalism in Bangladesh. First, legal reforms that address repressive laws such as the Digital Security Act. The government and media groups could work to amend vague provisions enabling censorship to ensure that laws are as carefully balanced to outline secrecy needs vs. press freedom needs. This may involve international support to assist with drafting journalist-protection laws. Second, the financial sustainability reform checks for diversified revenue sources. News outlets should develop membership models, premium content, and events, and they can even consider nonprofit funding avenues. Also, I think platforms such as Facebook and even Google should pay more ad revenue to the creators.

In addition to that, the government could motivate credible journalism start-ups with tax benefits. Third, a multi-scale approach to combating misinformation. Next week, media literacy programs should be available in school and college curricula. Fourth, the focus is on professional standards. News councils should update digital ethics codes and concrete newsrooms. Training for verification, mobile journalism, and data case studies. I think that technology with investment, the rest is under fifth, while news outlets must take up the practical for communication and analytics. International grants could fund innovation labs for testing such AI-assisted reporting formats in sixth place for the Diasporas, with special focus. These outlets could form cross-border collaborations with global news outlets. Finally, the sector requires additional information regarding universities' audiences' business models' and policies'

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Online journalism in Bangladesh is at a critical crossroads. The rise of the internet has profoundly disrupted traditional processes of news creation and consumption, providing unique opportunities for the democratic process and new ways to tell stories. Platforms have made citizen journalists, live reporting, and global Bangladeshi communities, some of whom had their services terminated or never had them, possible, which would have been unimaginable in the tenth part of a decade. However, these advances come alongside significant challenges that jeopardize the science's sustainability and credibility. The cases you look at show persistent threats from government censorship and legal harassment to financial instability and ethical dilemmas. While pioneering outlets such as Prothom Alo Online have successfully transitioned, others such as Jamuna TV Online illustrate how swiftly operational life can disintegrate under the pressures of politics and the economy.

Compounding the landscape is the spread of misinformation, eroding public trust when it is most needed. The future of quality online journalism relies on dealing with these systemic problems. We must see legal protections for press freedom, diversified revenue models, professional standards, investment in technology, etc. Significantly, these solutions depend on co-operation between journalists, platforms, policymakers and the public. The digital news ecosystem in Bangladesh is not very far from what the information age promises us and what it can do to our societies. The advent of the internet shattered traditional media monopolies but also created new ones: the internet can act like a single controlling entity, framing how we see the world. These next few years will decide whether online journalism lives up to its democratic promise or joins the many victims of digital disruption. The decisions taken today will determine the information ecosystems of the country for eras to come.

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