Of Promises and Press Freedom

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The violence surrounding the Women Development Policy 2008 last month, in which hundreds -- including a number of police officers and journalists -- were assaulted, held different levels of significance for different people. For some, it was the lead news on a few of the private television channels and was of obvious importance. Others, who saw that it was the fifth or sixth news item on other channels, did not think it was too big a deal. And for the majority of the population of Bangladesh who watch Bangladesh Television (BTV), the violence did not even occur.

This is just one example. These things happen every day, on every channel and front page. Every media organisation, be it newspaper or television channel, has its own editorial policy. Accordingly, it will give some news items more space or time, i.e., prominence, over others. But when there are discrepancies over major events happening in the country, the objectivity of the media comes into question. Can an event of major importance really be that varied in significance to different television stations and newspapers? Research has shown that the media set the public agenda. Thus the audience are influenced by the agenda set by the media and, if news treatment varies significantly, confused by it.

Every World Press Freedom Day (May 3), seminars and conferences are held everywhere on the state of the world's media and how free they are, how many journalists have been killed, imprisoned or arrested in different countries. But even beyond this there are things that matter -- how free the media allow themselves to be, free of pressures from their owners, which includes everyone from corporate organisations to politicians and, perhaps most importantly, the State. In the end, the press is about the people it serves, and its freedom is about being free enough to give its audience the facts and the truth behind the facts. Its freedom lies in the freedom of the audience to form their views and opinions from information gained through their right and access to news and information.

In our country, not only do we have different private television channels subtly serving the interests of their owning politicians or business corporations, but even State television and radio cannot be relied upon. This would not be surprising in an autocracy, but it is shocking in a democracy. In fact, they are the ones with the least credibility. Considering the fact that they have the widest reach, it is also cause for the greatest concern.

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According to the National Media Survey (NMS) 2005, television reach in urban areas was 87.9 percent compared to 55.5 percent in rural areas. Because private channels do not have terrestrial facilities, this basically means that in rural areas all people get to watch is BTV. According to the same survey, 22.5 percent of people listened to the radio, mainly in rural areas, with listener-ship actually declining significantly in urban areas. (In the last year, however, with private radio stations gaining popularity, listener-ship in urban areas has increased.) Radio in rural areas also, obviously, means Bangladesh Betar (BB). In a country where the reach of private media is so limited, the major