

The on again, off again mayor

A good index of our poor democratic culture

THIS is the third time that the mayor of Gazipur, MA Mannan, has been suspended since he was duly elected as mayor of that City Corporation on July 6, 2013. The order, however, has been stayed by the High Court. It has been more than four years that he was elected mayor, and regrettably, of these four years he has been suspended thrice, and spent 22 months in jail and only 18 months in office. So far 30 cases have been filed against him. And thus far every time he was sacked, he was reinstated by the Supreme Court, as were the three others.

Needless to say Mannan belongs to the BNP, as do four others who were elected as mayors in July of 2013, three of whom have met the same fate as Mannan's. They were also similarly suspended no sooner had they assumed their responsibilities.

Unfortunately, this blatant and repeated disregard for elected representatives of the people demonstrates the shameless abuse of the law by the administration. The repeated arrests only show its mala fide intention, and that it is pathologically loath to allow the opposition representatives to carry out their statutory functions as the elected representative of the people.

The fate of the four BNP mayors puts to lie the much vaunted claim of the ruling party that democracy has flourished in the country during its tenure. It has anything but. Democracy does not mean having an election and a parliament only. The local government bodies, a pillar of democracy, have suffered because of the attitude of the administration towards the elected councillors, chairmen and vice-chairmen belonging to the opposition camp. And it is the people of these areas, unfortunately, who have suffered most. These municipalities and city corporations have been given the short shrift by the current regime which does little to enhance the democratic credentials of the ruling party.

Use of Section 57 against journalists

Endangers press freedom

DESPITE the law minister's repeated assurance that Section 57 of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) Act would be scrapped, the controversial section remains alive and well and is being increasingly used to file cases against journalists. Now it is reported that, while Section 57 will be removed from the ICT Act, it will be incorporated in the new Digital Security Act, 2016.

The purpose of the Digital Security Act, 2016 is to address cybercrimes, and although we understand the need for such a law, experts have time and again expressed concerns about the broad and vague definitions in Section 57, giving scope for misuse and endangering freedom of speech and expression. And even though most countries around the world now have laws against cybercrimes, rarely do we see them being used to curb press freedom or having the scope to do so.

Here, however, we see case after case being lodged against members of the media under Section 57 of the ICT Act based on flimsy grounds. For example, in the last four months alone, at least 21 journalists were sued under Section 57 of the ICT Act. It is a greatly disturbing trend, especially given that it completely contradicts the basic principles of freedom of speech, thought, expression, etc., that are integral to a democracy.

There are already numerous ways in which journalists can be held accountable should they make a mistake, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, we must strongly protest the attempts to use Section 57 to silence them. We repeat our concerns regarding the suppression of information and urge the government to reconsider this Act, as it may seriously harm the credentials of our country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Protect the Queen of the East

I feel fortunate to have been born in Chittagong, a city with a rich history. Settlers from ancient Persia or medieval Europe may have settled in Chittagong to gain political and economic benefits, but its natural beauty containing mountains, rivers, lakes, the world's longest beach, and its strong breeze led many global explorers to find a permanent home here.

Alas, Chittagong is no longer as beautiful as it used to be. Its beautiful hills and trees are cut down mercilessly, causing landslides and water-logging, and ruining numerous livelihoods. Once known as "The Queen of the East", it has now become a depleted city. We urge the government to help make it glorious again.

Nur Jahan, Chittagong

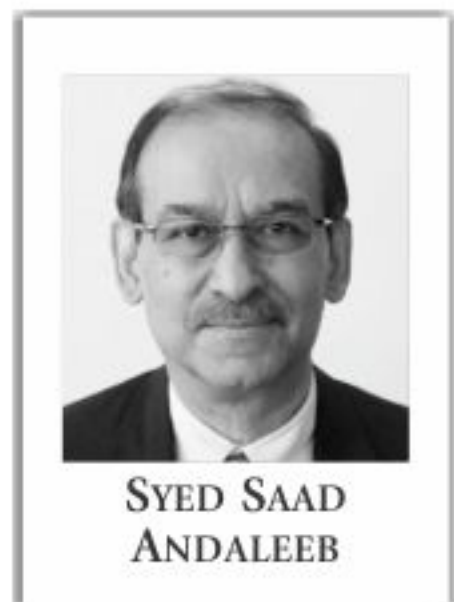
Why Bangladeshi channels are unpopular

The debate on whether Indian TV channels should be switched off has been running for a long time now. Our local TV channels are no less equal in quality, but the problem is that they're flooded with news, talk shows and ads. Many Indian channels exclusively air entertainment programmes. Our channels, in contrast, run news broadcasts all day and night, most of which are a repetition of the same newsreel. Whatever time remains is taken up by endless advertisements. It is difficult for viewers to stay interested in the story of a TV programmes by the time the advertisements end.

In my opinion, certain TV channels in our country should be left for telecasting entertaining and educational programmes only. And ads, as important as they are for generating revenue, should be incorporated in a rational manner.

Professor M Zahidul Haque,
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University

What ails the commercial research industry?



SYED SAAD
ANDALEEB

become even better at what they do. In fact, many global companies are reaping rich rewards from the insights gained through research. Consequently, they budget a significant amount of money for this purpose to "listen" to their key stakeholders, track demographic trends, follow competitive strategies, and monitor cultural and social trends that affect their line of business. Adapting their offerings based on feedback is basic to sustainability and profitability. Organisations that ignored information in the past, relying instead on experience and intuition, often found out the hard way why it was a bad choice: they became obsolete.

Here is an example of an organisation that benefitted substantially from research: Courtyard by Marriott found out that business travellers needed hassle-free service, relevant information, and time to relax during their travels. They made their check-in and check-out procedures efficient; seeded their website with maps, restaurant types and locations, and promotional materials; and introduced quiet lounges which didn't have music or TV noise to cause distraction. I don't need to elaborate on Marriott's customer satisfaction ratings or their bottom line!

Research can be very beneficial for organisations in Bangladesh. However, the practice of this professional activity by many research providers in the country has room for significant improvement. In a recent meeting of research providers and their larger clients, organised by a boutique research organisation, a variety of issues began to surface candidly about issues that ail the research industry.

Foremost in the discussions was the question of credibility. Research is a service that has credence properties. In such services, buyers can evaluate the product only after purchase or not at all. Most important to buyers of research are the suppliers' expertise and intentions. Several clients observed that research findings often did not portray reality, causing them to question their validity. A lack of connection between what is reported and the reality can shake the confidence of client organisations. Without strong methodological skills and appropriate analytical foundations, research organisations are likely to

bungle a research study and hurt their level of credibility that is imperative in this industry.

Another view was that the studies were often rudimentary from which the real issues and substance were difficult to extract. The obvious question raised by clients was "why do we have to extract meaning from pages filled with tables, graphs and charts? Isn't it the job of the research provider?" Referring to the voluminous reports, one client commented "they say a lot but mean very little!" Others pointed to the fact that the findings in the reports were generally not actionable, and the reporting was neither interesting nor impactful.

It is important to point out that the senior management does not have the time to read voluminous reports. It is



SOURCE: CAFFEINATEDCONFIDENCE

thus imperative that research firms provide digests or summaries that highlight key findings for senior management to peruse quickly and arrive at the relevant conclusions. It was also mentioned that objective and impactful reports must be brief – perhaps to the tune of 30 pages maximum. A 300-page report is unlikely to be even touched by senior management!

Long and tedious reports also point to another serious problem: researchers are unable to translate findings in succinct ways because of their lack of training in sophisticated analytical and communication techniques. A simple conjoint analysis (a multivariate procedure) that shows which attributes or features of a product or service customers are willing to trade off for another feature

can never be captured by traditional descriptive analysis. Or, for that matter, in the case of comparing several products or services, a perceptual map using multidimensional scaling may be much more vivid and thought-provoking than producing numerous tables comparing the products on individual dimensions.

Discussions also touched upon ethical issues ranging from data validity to matters of covert financial transactions. Who collected the data? From whom? And what are the reasons that can distort reality? Obfuscation along these lines is detrimental to a research provider's credibility. Unless these processes are made clear to the client, their trust in the research provider can be shaken.

The duplicity of unethical organisations (both providers and

clients) that inflate research budgets for unethical purposes was also mentioned, although there never was a big floor discussion on the matter. Perhaps this is one of the industry's dirty secrets! When research is construed mainly for money to change hands, the quality of such studies can be easily surmised. Apparently such practices have grown in number and volume for which the industry will suffer immeasurably.

Another concern was the dearth of budgets allocated for research even in the better-known companies. According to one research provider, most organisations treat research as an afterthought because they do not really understand its importance. Hence they are not inclined to spend on this vital service. To the cognoscenti, money spent

on research is not an expense; it is an investment.

An oft-repeated problem was the non-involvement of senior management in helping define the research study. Apparently, many senior managers stay away from research, allowing it to be handled by junior staff and leaving it to their discretion, mercy and machinations. It is then up to the junior managers to interpret and convey the information to senior management who are then swayed one way or another without having been involved with the study.

Underlying the discussions at the meeting was a serious concern about the lack of competence and professionalism in the industry, especially where standards were sorely lacking. Apparently many research providers are not interested in industry standards as it would expose their weaknesses.

Various enterprises in manufacturing, service and the social sectors are also poorly staffed to solicit, monitor or evaluate research. On several occasions when they were approached, their response was either very dismissive (they don't need research) or they came back saying, "Why don't you give us a proposal?"

Writing a proposal for an organisation that cannot articulate its own information needs is a difficult challenge if not impossible. Examples such as these suggest that research is not fully understood by many who could gain from it. They must learn, and quickly, how to conceptualise research questions, understand research designs, and how to interpret and understand research results – i.e., become effective consumers of research.

Insights from research can be invaluable to most organisations, especially those operating in complex market environments. The role of research must be understood correctly and significant investments must be made to build this industry. The alternative is to buy knowledge from abroad, which can be exorbitant and can mean perpetual dependence on external sources. More critically, dependence on research from abroad runs the risk of being manipulated without one knowing that one is being manipulated. That indeed is a vulnerable position to be in!

To invigorate itself and provide a vital service to the constellation of organisations operating in information-deficient environments, the research industry must invest in training, develop industry standards, and inculcate a spirit of professionalism. Developing trust in the products it offers is an absolute prerequisite. Who will drive these initiatives is for the industry to contemplate and act upon – the sooner the better.

Syed Saad Andaleeb is Vice Chancellor of BRAC University and Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, USA.

After 16 years, 9/11 Truth Movement fights on



TULSATHIT
TAPTIM

collapse of World Trade Centre 7.

The plea has come against a backdrop that a lot of people, including a vast number of Americans themselves, were not aware that it was the third skyscraper which came down on that day, a few hours after the Twin Towers were completely destroyed.

This year's anniversary of the historic event can be a lot different from previous ones. It's because the 9/11 Truth Movement, which believes that what panned out before the entire world on that faithful day in September, 2001 was an "inside job", has been on an unprecedented offensive, buoyed by growing acknowledgement that WTC 7 came down in a very unusual way. The US political system, which gained much sympathy at previous commemorations of 9/11, can be on the back foot in a few weeks' time.

Surging publicity surrounding WTC 7 and debate on why the steel-reinforced building came down in a free-fall motion, like all structures subjected to controlled demolition would, upgraded the 9/11 Truth Movement from a bunch of "conspiracy theorists" who lacked credibility to a group of people who should be taken seriously.

A growing number of scientists, engineers, architects and academics have questioned the US government's official story that Middle Eastern fanatics carried out the worst terrorist attack on

American soil.

The so-called Truthers are now asking scientific questions, as opposed to what it describes as implausible or impossible theories of the US government's official investigators, who have been more or less backed up by America's mainstream media.

The questions cover the manners of the collapses of the three high-rise buildings, the lack of plane wreckage at the World Trade Center compound, the next-to-zero evidence of crashed commercial planes at the Pentagon and



Pennsylvania, the "cartoon physics" of a plane "melting" into one of the Twin Towers and even the touching story of some passengers making phone calls from very high altitudes.

"Inside job" videos on YouTube have been increasingly abundant and their numbers of views are climbing. Most comments have been in favour of the 9/11 Truth Movement, although it's reasonable to argue that most watchers came to support "conspiracy theories" in the first place. What's remarkable is that skepticism or open mockery of the official story has come largely from Americans themselves and not even one Arab-

looking doubter appeared in those videos.

Proponents and supporters of the official version of what happened may soon have their backs against the wall. Two groups in particular have been pilloried. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, the official investigators, has been ridiculed for failing to mention WTC 7 in its report.

The National Institute of Standard and Technology, America's virtual utmost scientific body, has been jeered for saying that Building 7 came down in a virtual free fall into its own footprint as a result of office fire.

So far, the official story remains the one to believe as far as the majority of the world population is concerned. The "Truthers", however, are hoping that the "tipping point" will come one day, though not probably in the near future. They include some who lost loved ones in the attacks.

While this year's anniversary can give the US government a hard time, nothing decisive or earth-shattering is expected to happen. Even those totally convinced that 9/11 was a "false flag" event, something designed to create pretexts for controversial American moves like the war on Iraq, say the stake "is too high" to change the official narrative.

In fact, the entire world's status quo is at stake. If America, the biggest democracy, is found guilty of 9/11, repercussions will rock a much-cherished political system embraced by many countries.

The mainstream media, whose reputations have suffered from severe criticism lately, will face even harsher condemnation. World diplomacy and politics at the highest international level will be upended.

Some "Truthers" have cited the Kennedy assassination and its consequences as a proof that something

is simply "too big to blame". And while JFK was a president, he was just one man. 9/11 was bigger because it involved thousands of American lives, which makes many "Truthers" believe that "cover up" efforts must be doubled. Yet other "Truthers" are convinced that because 9/11 concerned thousands of innocent American lives, nothing should be too big to blame, and efforts to "uncover the truth" must be doubled.

The latter group of Truthers also pointed out that there was no YouTube in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. They said the biggest oversight of whoever carried out 9/11 was that they did not anticipate what YouTube, which came into existence a few years after the terror, could lead to.

It remains to be seen what YouTube will actually lead the 9/11 story to. Currently, YouTube is showing the world how WTC 7 came down, and allowing viewers to judge for themselves. It also demonstrates in repeated and super-slow motions the gut-wrenching collapses of the Twin Towers, which purportedly were penetrated by commercial airplanes hijacked by Arab terrorists. In addition, YouTube has made it possible for doubters to ask for plane wreckage, bodies and passengers, and personnel belongings at the Pentagon and Pennsylvania.

All the clips are there. Some show the actual incidents while others display added graphics or comments that question the official story. Seeds of doubt have been planted, and many neutral viewers admitted they were more "open-minded" after watching some of the videos. The best way, though, is watch both sides of the story and go from there.

Tulsathit Taptim is Editor-at-large, The Nation, Thailand.

This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.