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Media: Between a rock and a hard place

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2019 has not been a comfortable year for the media globally. While nobody has yet tallied up the numbers internationally, 7,200 jobs were lost just in the U.S., according to the business and finance news organisation *Business Insider's* own calculation.

This includes Vice Media, which grew from a magazine to a globally renowned news brand in the matter of a few years. They let go of 250 employees, including 10 percent of its international news team. *BuzzFeed*, which had expanded its verticals—and recruited aggressively—similarly axed 250 jobs. Founder Jonah Peretti reportedly told his employees the “total employees revenue growth was not enough to be successful in the long run.” NBCUniversal downsized by 70 jobs, while at *National Geographic*, that number was 60.

Pew Research Center observed in its annual report that newsroom employment was the lowest in a decade, and will only continue to dip further.

On the other hand, the media watchdog found out that news outlets which are “digital native”—as in they were born from the web, instead of migrating from print to web—performed the best in the entire sector. Very few of them were forced to lay off their employees. This includes news organisations like *Business Insider*, *Mashable*, and *Vox*. In India, the Zee-owned *Daily News and Analysis*, popularly known as DNA, stopped its print and just decided to retain its online version. Pew followed this up by adding that in 2018, newspaper circulation reached its lowest level since 1940. Mull

on that for a moment.

Contrary to popular opinion, newspapers, especially mid-sized ones, do not actually profit from its actual physical unit. The main earnings are from advertisements, and ad dollars are now catching up on the low subscription rates. It is not unknown that more and more advertisers are choosing to invest in online mediums, over traditional media. A report on the website of The Poynter Institute points out that by 2020, the revenue earned from digital advertising globally will be the same size as the GDP of Ireland! Facebook and Google, of course, will be getting the largest cut of that, the website says.

Meanwhile, even a decade after Facebook and Google have become “news giants”, media news organisations are still trying to figure out how to... “internet”. News organisations are hopping from one app to another in hopes of capturing this weird new audience that neither watches the 8pm news, nor demands a newspaper at the breakfast table.

In such a scenario, how is the media in Bangladesh faring?

According to 2018 figures, there are 214 Dhaka-based daily newspapers of which around 26 are major outlets, and 30 tv channels with news teams. With such a proliferation of media houses, one would presume that the business of journalism is a thriving trade—that the fourth estate exists as an unwavering pillar of democracy backed by robust financials.

The truth, however, is quite different—the media houses are all jumping hurdles and trying to save their balance sheets

from going into the red. Some are discovering that ads have given way for digital marketing before they could even establish profitable websites. Some are trying to hold on to audiences that are fast disappearing. A few are discovering that a news organisation is more than just a business—it comes with certain responsibilities that weigh heavy on the shoulders. All are having to reckon with the fact that journalism is time-consuming and guzzles resources, and one has to be innovative for return on investment.

And so, over the last year, just like newsrooms all over the world, newsrooms here too have been laying off journalists. They are not just downsizing their junior infantry, but people in senior decision-making positions. *Star Weekend* interviewed laid-off journalists from six television news stations, and one newspaper to analyse the situation of media layoffs. Of the seven media houses we interviewed, three are either owned by lawmakers or are affiliated with lawmakers, three are owned by corporate moguls and only one is owned by someone who is from a journalism background. Between two and three people were interviewed from each newsroom, for cross-verification. However, we are choosing to disclose neither the names of the interviewees nor the names of the media organisations so as to protect our sources. All the events they described happened in the last one year.

Months without pay, sacked at last

Unable to pay their employees, TV#1 had to let go of a minimum of 32 employees, comprising of reporters (11 of whom were female), camerapersons, newsroom editors, production workers, presenters, and makeup men.

A senior reporter describes her experience of losing her job at TV#1, “We had not been getting paid for five months prior to getting sacked. We sat with the administration several times, and they assured us that we would get our dues, but they were getting increasingly annoyed.”

She continued, “At one point, the administration threatened that if people continue to accost them about the due salaries, they will completely shut down the news section.”

“On April 30, 2019, I got a call from the reception desk at the office, while I was out covering news. I was told to come to the office immediately and submit my equipment. When I entered the office, I saw many of my colleagues were crying. They informed me that we were being let go.

“I went to HR. The HR official told me that the office cannot afford me, and that if I resign on that very day, they will pay my due salaries,” she described. There was no other option—they were neither going to continue with her nor terminate her with a severance package. According to the employee, the administration used her arrears as a negotiation tool to force her to hand in her resignation.

A similar story was relayed by a senior video editor who has been with the newsroom since the television’s inception a decade back. “Some resigned on that very day. Some of us waited for around a month. When we understood that it will not bring anything different, we also resigned. They cleared some of my dues, but I am still owed nine months’ worth of arrears.”

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