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"I did not expect this at all. In my 21 years as a journalist, I had done my best reporting for this television. I won them 12 awards," lamented the reporter.

The camera chief of the television station was also let go. "The administration came and told me that they were going to cut costs and that I must submit a list of highly-paid camera people to get rid of. I declined to do any such thing," he says

"On March 25, 2019, I came back to the office after completing an assignment. I had just submitted my camera when the HR called me. I was told to hand in a resignation letter," he described. His too was a case of forced resignation, in violation of the country's labour laws.

"I was simply given the salary of the running month and the next, and made to leave," he added. The journalist has since then filed suit with the labour court for his severance package.

Also among those sacked is the chief reporter—it is the same story all over again. "In addition to us, they also let go of three more top-level camera people, one executive producer, and two producers, all of whom were highly-paid."

When even electronic media giants could not spare their employees from sacking, smaller television stations cannot imagine faring better. TV#5 fired 18 of its employees on October 10, 2019 because, as they were told, "business is not going well". On October 10, we noticed that in addition to the salary of the month, they had gotten 10 days' extra payment, informs its former national desk in-charge. "We went to HR and they told us that we are no longer needed," he stated. Last week, they took the help of the union and sat down with the chairperson to demand severance packages, but were told that they would not be paid a dime.

TV#6 let go of 24 of its journalists between October 24 and October 30, informed its former employees. While no reporters were let go of, the numbers still included camerapersons, video journalists, and video editors. They were told that the television, which started broadcasting five years ago, took this decision because it had been facing a fund crisis.

"They called me on October 26, 2019 around evening. The HR official didn't give me any explanation. He just said that the office could not afford me," informed a senior videographer.

The interviewee was handed a resignation letter drafted by the administration in his name, and was asked to simply sign it, in effect making it a case of forced resignation. As a result, the employee essentially wrote off his right to getting a severance package.

"How could they do this without giving a single day's notice? I didn't get any gratuity or severance package. During my tenure, not a single equipment was damaged in any way. In my six years, the office even gave me two promotions. I have never been jobless for a single day in my life, and here I am unemployed," he stated.

Yet another laid-off employee described how he was coerced into signing a "forced resignation" letter. "The administration called on November 9 and asked me to sign the resignation letter drafted by them. I told them that since I have worked there from the beginning of the channel (for six years), I need to know why I have to resign.

They have even promoted me in the past for being sincere in my work. They didn't tell me anything immediately, rather told me to take some time to think about it," described the senior producer.

#### Changing nature of business challenging newsrooms

All the journalists interviewed stated that they were let go because business is not going well.

"The ads are no longer coming to the television stations because we are losing our audience," stated one interviewee of TV#4. Another informed that the whole house had become dependent on one major corporate funder and that no salaries would be paid out unless that ad came in.

Fahim Ahmed, chief news editor of Jamuna Television concurred. "The country's advertising budget is very low when compared to the number of television channels. I started my career in television in 2003, when television commercials would sell for Tk 50,000 per minute. Those ads are going for Tk 500, so the income of the television channels have gone down."

Former Cultural Affairs Minister, and managing director of Desh TV, Asaduzzaman Noor says that televisions are not being able to attract audiences because they are not building a brand image.

"Our tv channels do not have any specific character. All of them are doing the same thing—entertainment, drama, news, talk shows. How will people know where to go for what? You need dedicated, specialised channels."

"If they want to do business, they need to know what the people are demanding. They themselves do not know what they have in store, then why will people watch those channels? And why will clients give them advertisements?" questions the former Minister.

Zenith, a global "return on investment" agency, analysed the next 30 rising ad markets last year, and found Bangladesh to be the second-fastest grower—its pace only exceeded by that of Iran. "The second-biggest growth in adspend will come from Bangladesh, which we forecast to grow by USD 457 million between 2017 and 2020, reaching USD 1,311 million," the agency stated in its press release. Converted into our currency, the estimate is Tk 11,165 crores.

However, this does not necessarily translate into more ads for newspapers and television stations. This newspaper found out last year that the Bangladeshi private sector is spending nearly Tk 1,000 crore every year on digital marketing on Facebook and Google to reach their target audience.

And the media is not quite being able to capture the market.

When faced with an ad crunch, media owners had to contend with one crucial question: do they truly care about journalism, or was it simply a business for them? Unfortunately, quite a few owners were in this pickle—these were the ones who had set up organisations neither caring for journalism, nor doing any market research on whether journalism actually is a viable business. And in these trying times, they fared the worst.

"As a national desk in-charge my salary was Tk 17,500, which got increased to Tk 19,000 over the last two years. None of our district correspondents were paid anything, and were made to work voluntarily. As a result, they would often extort their

sources. They were engaging in corruption," described the interviewee of TV#6. The television station started off with 45 reporters, but currently has a total of eight reporters in the newsroom, showing its utter disregard for journalism.

"The media owners think that if they do not have the news in their control, they are powerless, but they do not all have to have news sections," comments former minister Noor.

"Many of the business magnates, who are the owners of the channels, use it to show their power and prestige. They were not professional or passionate. So when they started running losses, the owners were not willing to continue," says Jamuna's CNE Fahim.

Meanwhile, as the cash crunch squeezes harder, newspapers are being forced to modernise, leading it to let go of sections that no longer serve a purpose. This includes people whose jobs have been to manually compose a newspaper's layout and the reading section—so named for their jobs as proof-readers.

As jobs become modernised, Newspaper#1 had to let go of three people from the reading section. This included the section in-charge who was let go off, after having worked with the newspaper for between one to two decades. "I was verbally given a termination notice in the first week of July. I informed the union, and they intervened with the administration on my behalf, requesting that I be given 90 days' notice. On September 30, 2019, when my 90 days were up, HR met with me. I was asked to sign a termination letter and handed over three months' of salary. But I declined, saying that I need the benefits given to me by the wage board since my career spans over two decades. They refused to comply."

As the media industry goes through crisis after crisis, *Star Weekend* reached out to K Anis Ahmed, the publisher of *Dhaka Tribune* and *Bangla Tribune* to reflect on the situations. Ahmed is director at Gemcon Group, which has a long history of operating newspapers, most notably, the extremely popular *Ajker Kagoj*, which had to close down on a single day's notice in 2007.

"Operating as a news media is harder today by magnitudes compared to the early 90s. Government rules curb both freedom and business viability. The issues with the Digital Security Act are well known. Provisions totally inconsistent with open market systems, like the wage board for journalists, and punitive duties on raw material, make costs almost unmanageable," he states.

"The fact that social media has vacuumed out a lot of ads is another big blow. Governments should be passing laws that ensure due revenue for those who do the actual gathering of the news, rather than those who distribute it seemingly for "free". In short, running news media today is way, way tougher than it was in the '90s. This is as true for Bangladesh today as it is in most parts of the world today."

But the crux of the situation is that when media businesses fail, it is true journalism that suffers. "Investigative journalism is time-consuming and requires a lot of resources. When business is going bad, houses just do not have the kind of passion for journalism needed to still persist, still continue at it, no matter what," stated the sacked investigative head of TV#5.

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