

"If you don't have a free press, then you don't have freedom"

Zafar Sobhan, Editor, Dhaka Tribune speaks about freedom of expression and the press and the challenges for journalism in Bangladesh with Maliha Khan

What are the challenges for journalism in Bangladesh's context and overall in the fake news/post-truth era we live in?

I don't think journalism is any different today than it ever was. There's always been fake news, propaganda, and people trying to pass their own agenda. Now, the means through which fake news can be propagated are much wider.

The fundamental problem we face in journalism in Bangladesh today is that there are a lot of restrictions. There have always been restrictions but now there are more. We now have the Digital Security Act which criminalises many things that weren't so before. Things are much tighter and the appetite among the powers that be for accepting dissenting voices and criticism is far less than it used to be. So that's the first challenge to working as a journalist here.

The secondary challenge for someone like me, who is the editor of a newspaper here, is the economics of journalism. It's very difficult for newspapers to make money. That's a problem for me, not necessarily a problem for a reporter working here except insofar as their paycheck has to come from somewhere and there are fewer jobs overall.

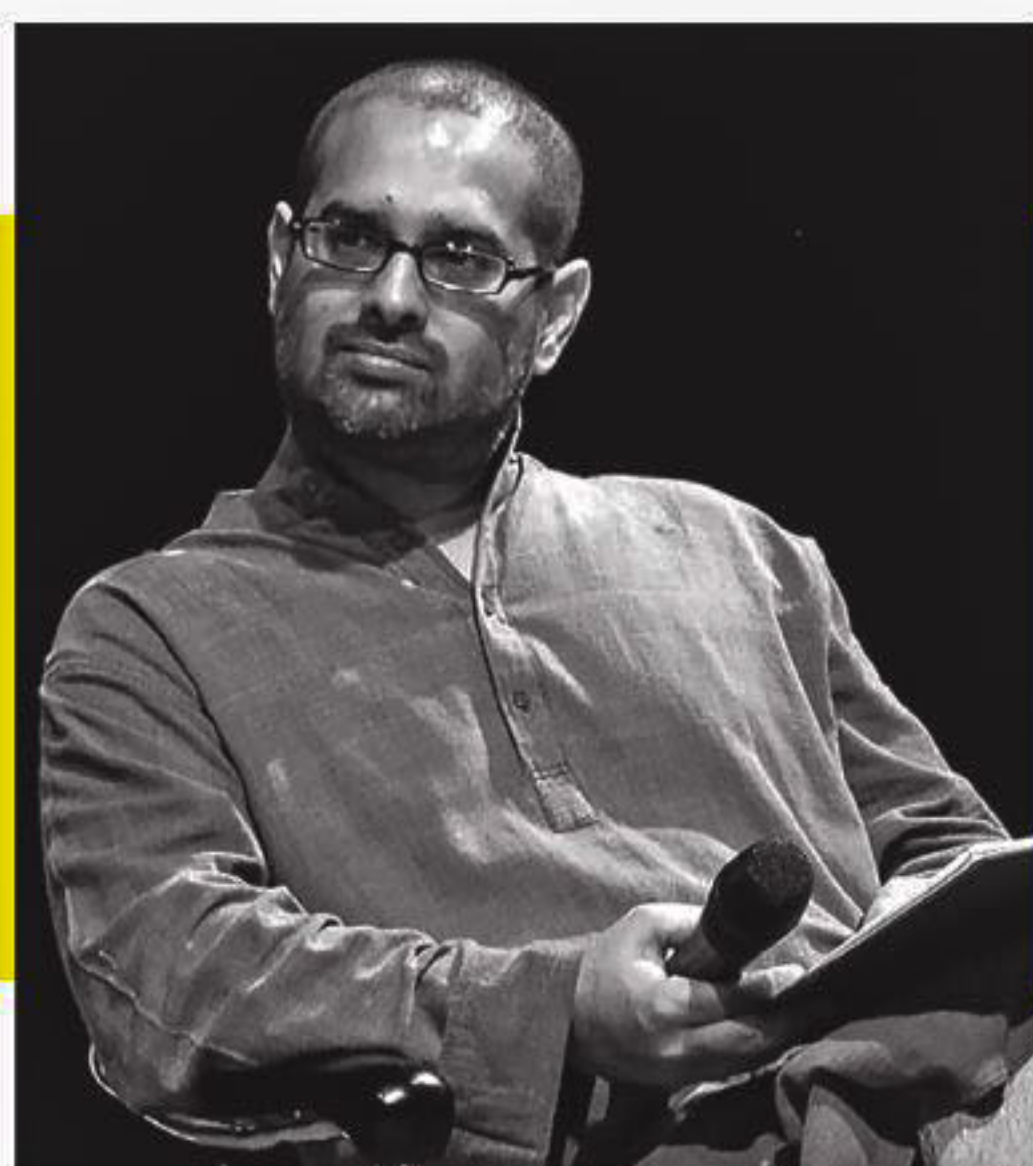


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How are you dealing with these challenges?

It's tough. We lose people all the time because we have a limit on how much we can pay. No one gets into journalism to make money but at the end of the day, people need to make a living, they have their families to feed, and there are many other options.

We're very fortunate—I have partners in the newspaper, investors willing to help the process along. And that I think is key. The days of being able to run a newspaper as a purely profit-making entity may be coming to a close. We have to figure out different ways to operate—there are sponsorship, donation, and online subscription models. A lot of it also has to do with the mission of the newspaper and of the newspaper's owners. They have to have a commitment to quality journalism.

There hasn't been much experimentation with business models here. Why is that? We have a conservative market here. Across the world, there are really no models for making money off of print publications. The bottom has fallen out of that market—it's imploded. They all make it from their online subscriptions. If you're going to make money from newspapers, you need to make money from your online readers. I have 10 times the readers I do online, as offline.

There have been many models

followed—but the most successful one is the subscription model, like what the *New York Times* has. But a subscription doesn't necessarily work in Bangladesh because we don't have a history of that and in fact, until up to a year or so, it wouldn't have been possible. We didn't have the superstructure in place to do online transactions—now it is, but people still don't have the habit where they want to pay to read online. It's going to be many years before we can follow that model. We are going to have to get inventive.

What are the implications of the lack of free expression and free press in Bangladesh today?

I dare say I have a bias in this situation—but if you don't have a free press, then you don't have freedom and you don't have democracy.

If we wish to express ourselves politically, we need a platform for this expression. The only platform that exists is the media. Now, stifling the press has two effects: the first is that it takes away the platform via which policy can be debated, malgovernance pointed out, and dissent expressed. If you don't have a platform, you can't dissent. Even more crucially it keeps information away from the public eye. If you are not fully informed, how can you exercise your democratic rights at the ballot box or indeed any other kind of right? The second is that it sends a message to the general public. Where the press is stifled, the public understands where it stands. Press freedom is the barometer that the public uses to gauge its own freedoms and it tailors its own actions accordingly.

Now that said, things are changing with respect to the mainstream media being the sole platform available for freedom of expression and holding the powerful to account. In this day and age, the means of communication have been democratised and so now the mainstream media is less relevant than ever before. The media operates by norms and values

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and is itself accountable. Social media in all its messy glory is not.

With the decline of print media, do you think media influence has also gone down?

It has gone down but simply because we're not allowed to say many things. It's very difficult to criticise and hold the powerful to account—which is really the fundamental goal of journalism. You want to have an open debate on the issues of the day: discuss policies—good or bad,

how politicians, NGOs, and the private sector are doing their jobs. When it comes to the government, since the tolerance for criticism is so circumscribed here in Bangladesh, it makes the impact of journalism far less.

On the one hand, aggregate newspaper readership is plummeting. But if you look at readers online, that number is growing. It's not as though people are not reading newspapers, just reading them in a different format. So, readership has actually gone up.

Influence has gone down simply because we're not really able to hold people accountable the way we have in the past. If there's one reason people are going to wait for the mainstream media, it's because readers understand that. They understand that we'll push as far as we can and they have to read between the lines. People recognise what's going on—the reading public is very savvy. So, they look to alternative sources. Now the danger of looking to alternative sources is that it's very hard to authenticate—it may be credible, it may not be credible. Within this space, a lot of people have carved out a space whereby they are peddling news which isn't true. Nevertheless, I think many conscientious readers of newspapers have now found alternative avenues to inform them alongside the traditional mainstream media.

What potential is there for longform journalism in Bangladesh, given that there are practically no dedicated longform publications?

I edited *Forum* magazine which was really the first longform platform in Bangladesh. I know that there is a limited market, but among the people who do read print, longform is appreciated and has impact.

One of the limitations placed on journalism right now is that you can't really do much of hard-hitting, in-depth political journalism. But what that allows one to do is that it allows one to focus on different kinds of journalism and storytelling. The story of a village and multigenerational stories of a family over decades—to me, that's an incredible story.

A lot of journalism is moving in that direction—more *New Yorker* rather than the *New York Times*. I enjoy telling people's stories. The reason I'm still in, the reason anyone is still in journalism, even with all the limitations placed on us, are the stories out there we can tell.

What does the future of journalism in Bangladesh look like?

Basically, it is our ability to do our job itself—which is to tell the truth, hold the powerful to account, be a platform for dissent, be able to contribute to public policy discussions. That space is shrinking not just in Bangladesh but all over the world. Look around—in the US, India. It seems that liberal democratic values, including respect for freedom of expression and respect for freedom of the press, is in retreat right now. That's the biggest threat.

That's not something I, or any newspaper, can solve in isolation. It's a decision we as a society, as a people, as Bangladeshis, have to decide—what kind of society, what kind of a country we want to live in. Do we want to live in a country where freedom of expression and freedom of the press are given exalted space or are we happy to live in a country where fundamental freedoms are circumscribed?