

RTI in the time of coronavirus

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THE Covid-19 pandemic, sowing misery across the world, has thrown the role of the state into stark relief. No entity but the government can command the resources and the all-of-society coordination essential to respond adequately to this threat. Countries where the people and the government have mutual trust are likely to fare better.

In times of such unprecedented calamity, the most important ingredient for trust building is information sharing. People want correct information about the spread of a mysterious disease that they knew so little about. They want to be assured that their government is handling the situation effectively, that all necessary preparations are in place, that they are getting all the information they need and nothing is being hidden from them.

The immense importance of the dissemination of information that people can trust has been underlined daily over the last three months by the news media. They highlighted the impact of disinformation and misinformation in countries where people distrusted their government.

What strategy should governments, then, follow to reassure the people and allay their concerns during such a crisis? The best guidance is available in the Right to Information (RTI) Act which has been enacted, under different names, in 130 of the 209 countries affected by the emergency.

The RTI Act requires governments, in normal times, to keep their people informed, both proactively and through individual requests, about what they do on their behalf. In times of serious emergencies like the Covid-19 crisis, the responsibility is multiplied manifold. Governments all over the world, including ours, probably never had a responsibility like this to come up with their best public communications skills to help citizens through the pandemic.

Citizens, of course, understand that their government does not have all the information about a new virus and that advice can change according to the latest scientific evidence. They simply like to be taken into confidence by their government, to feel assured that their opinions matter, that their government feels accountable to

them, that they will be kept informed of everything they need to know. When citizens feel so empowered, misinformation and politicisation cannot easily take root.

The first thing that people want to know in such a crisis is that their government knows what to do. So a government's tendency is to wait until it has definitive answers. This is not easy to do when the threat is a new virus and knowledge is growing every day. Masks or no masks? How to test and where to get the testing kits? Are there enough ventilators for patients and protective gears for medical workers? How to provide for extra hospital beds if the need arises? Is there any effective treatment? How quickly can it be developed? The answers to such questions are not easy, and they change as medical science collects more evidence.

To generate public confidence in such an uncertain situation, the RTI law prescribes that governments do two things: communicate what they know and can recommend *at the time*; and listen to their people. "Here is what we know today, and what we do not know. Here is the action to take today in order to protect lives and livelihoods. What are your concerns?"

On the communication aspect, the RTI law provides for "proactive disclosures" by the government of all information of public interest generally and of particular relevance to situations like the present crisis. Section 6(4) of the Bangladeshi Act stipulates that every public authority "shall publish all (...) policies and decisions and shall, if necessary, explain the reasons and causes in support of such policies and decisions."

The law thus requires governments to explain their policies and decisions to their people. As the primary objective of the law is to establish transparency and accountability of all government work to the people, there is an inherent requirement here that governments should be as candid and forthcoming as possible and let people know the reality as it is. There is no scope for hiding or misrepresenting the facts.

Where governments succeed in imparting information in such a manner, they are likely to discover that people are normally willing to listen to them. When governments earn the confidence of the people, the latter is more likely to accept the reality and less likely to panic or spread rumours.



An information board about coronavirus is seen on a platform at Montparnasse train station in Paris, on March 13, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS

They are also more inclined to abide by legitimate curtailment of some of their rights. When they fail, fake news flourishes.

History will record that government-people interaction has seldom been so intense globally as in the last three months. It has gone through ups and downs and much variation between countries. When the crisis is over, it is destined to become an important subject for in-depth studies and research. Combined knowledge from the experiences of different countries and lessons learned from them would be of extreme importance for future generations.

But that will have to wait for some more time. On top of the medical crisis, a socio-economic debacle is looming large on the horizon. It is clearly heading towards becoming a crisis of a much larger magnitude and longer duration. Government-people interaction during this period will increase manifold, as will the need for information sharing.

Most governments have by now announced stimulus packages to revamp their economy, badly ravaged by Covid-19. As disbursements commence, the recipient groups would all be keen to know if the principles of transparency and accountability, enshrined in the RTI Act, are being

strictly observed. Is the money reaching the rightful claimants? How would corruption be tackled?

The RTI Acts provide guidance on this as well. It will be important, therefore, for government offices, dealing with the Covid-19 crisis generally and disbursement of stimulus packages in particular, to be acquainted with them. People will surely use the law to seek specific documents. Records must be properly preserved for possible inspection. Section 5 of the RTI Act requires that "every authority shall prepare catalogue and index of all information and preserve it in an appropriate manner."

Record-keeping and cataloguing of information will also help in data collection. They will be of great value for research and government planning in the future. Lessons learned from them in different countries would be of immense value for future generations.

To go about the task more systematically, governments in countries where the RTI/FOI law exists may consider setting up a special mechanism to deal with and coordinate all information-related activities during the crisis. These would include proactive disclosures of all information needs discussed above and those related to individual requests. Specifically, designated officers (DO),

foreseen in the law, with necessary workforce, may be entrusted by governments to deal with and respond to Covid-19-related RTI requests online.

Despite the unimaginable damage caused so far by Covid-19 worldwide, one of its most positive outcomes is the close interaction it generated between governments and the people to combat the menace. It provided opportunities to both sides to develop a practice which, if properly nurtured, will be of great value to all nations in the future.

People have reposed trust in their governments during these most trying times, abided by the regulations and restrictions imposed upon them, and made personal sacrifices of an unprecedented nature. Governments must reciprocate by recognising their special need for information with regard to many areas of concern thrown up by the crisis.

Even if the medical crisis comes to an end soon, a long time will lie ahead for nations and the international community as a whole to come out of the doldrums. Continued interaction and cooperation between the people and governments during this crucial time will be of utmost importance.

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IN MEMORIAM

Ruhul Amin Mazumder: A patron of the arts

RAMENDU MAJUMDAR

IT was about ten or twelve years ago that Ruhul Amin Mazumder called me one day to say, "Ramendu, I am giving you a responsibility. You will circulate the news of my death in the media [when the time comes]." I didn't expect such a request from a man who was always full of life despite his health conditions. I remember I used to meet him from time to time at Dhaka Club. He was witty and friendly. But I didn't know that he had been bedridden in the last three years. I felt remorse at having fallen out of touch—in these three years, I never called him, but instead kept a one-way contact by sending calendars and New Year greeting cards.

I came in contact with Ruhul Amin Mazumder in the late 70s or early 80s when he was the Sales Manager of Bangladesh Tobacco Company Ltd (now British American Tobacco Bangladesh). Bitopi Advertisers was the BTC's communications agency and I used to handle their account at Bitopi. Mr Mazumder was our point of contact. We all knew that he was quite straightforward and didn't hesitate to tell anything bluntly to anyone's face. One day he behaved so rudely with me that I felt very offended. I came back to our office and told my friend Reza Ali, who was the owner of the

agency, that I would not handle this account anymore. BTC was our major account. Reza Bhai probably talked to Mr Mazumder and Mr Zahed Husain, the Marketing Manager who was also involved in decision making. The next day, Mr Mazumder called me and apologised for his behaviour. Since then, he became very affectionate to me and we developed a friendly relationship.

I learned one important lesson from him. Referring to one of our mutual friends who didn't care to keep contact with anyone if there was no prospect of material gains, he told me: "Look, everyone pampers a person when he or she is in power, but doesn't care after he or she is retired. But the real PR is about maintaining contact with a person when he or she is retired or not in a position to favour you. People are very much touched when you do that."

He said this not just from a PR point of view, but also from his conviction and humane feelings too. I have tried to follow his advice all my life because I strongly believe that human relationships are built on sincere feelings and mutual respect, not on material gains.

Bangladesh Tobacco Company was a pioneer in introducing theme-based calendars in our country. Personally, I take pride in my close association



Ruhul Amin Mazumder

PHOTO: COLLECTED

with developing all these calendars. The person who inspired us in this regard was Mr Zahed Husain, who was senior to Mr Mazumder at BTC. Zahed Bhai was an engineer by training but had an unbelievable capacity to grasp anything new, and within a short time he developed the marketing team of the company and became a member of its policymaking team. Because of his upbringing in a well-cultured family, he was quite broad-minded and didn't care about petty things. He was

a perfectionist. Mr Mazumder used to work with him closely and both of them guided us in our work. Mr Mazumder gave me an open cheque saying I could patronise any good publication with a BTC advertisement without his prior approval. That's why it was easy for me to help many publications in those days.

He inspired us to produce an audio cassette of Nazrul Sangeet by the legendary singer Firoza Begum and sponsored many audio cassettes of theatre plays. Once we arranged the famous play "Tumhari Amrita" by Shabana Azmi and Farooq Sheikh in Dhaka. BTC sponsored the play on behalf of our Theatre School. Mr Mazumder was very excited about this event which created quite a sensation in our cultural life.

He had a complication when he was having a bypass surgery for his heart problem. He lost his normal voice. Since then, he spoke in a low, husky voice. Before he was bedridden, he came to Dhaka Club to chat with his old friends. I could feel the warmth of his heart whenever I met him at the club.

He was a real patron of arts. He particularly liked our play "Payer Awaj Paoa Jay". Besides Ferdousi and Abdullah Al Mamun, he was a great admirer of Mohammad Zakaria. He always thought of doing something for

this great actor. He appreciated us for introducing the Mohammad Zakaria Memorial Award.

Ruhul Amin Mazumder had a successful professional career. Before joining the Pakistan Tobacco Company (which later became Bangladesh Tobacco Company), he taught English at Dhaka College and Pakistan Airforce Collage at Lower Topa, Muree. He worked with the BTC for 24 years and retired as Director of Corporate Affairs. He was an active Rotarian and served as the President of Sandhani National Eye Donation Society. He was a member of the National Societs.

His loving wife of 50 years was at his bedside when he breathed his last. His two daughters were in the US and Singapore. They couldn't come thanks to the present lockdown condition. He lost his only son four months ago, but good for him, he didn't have to bear the pain of the loss as he was in a state of coma then.

Ruhul Amin Mazumder, 84, left us in the early hours of April 7, 2020. His innumerable friends, admirers and, of course, his family will cherish his memory for a long time.

May his soul rest in peace.

Ramendu Majumdar is Honorary President (Worldwide) at the International Theatre Institute (ITI) and Managing Director at Expressions Limited.

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

HARRIET QUIMBY'S FLIGHT ACROSS THE ENGLISH CHANNEL
April 16, 1912

On this day in 1912, American aviator Harriet Quimby became the first woman to fly across the English Channel, guiding her French Blériot monoplane through heavy overcast from Dover, England, to Hardelet, France.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Hip-hop songs
5 Audition goal
9 City on the Mohawk River
11 Brown shade
12 Beer mug
13 Goats
14 Keg need
15 One with instant siblings
17 Red shade
19 Tell tales
20 Places for pads
21 Mafia leader
22 Pretentious
24 Feeling down
26 Group of top players
29 Flowed into

30 Up-and-coming actress
32 Flyer
34 Pricing word
35 Trig topic
36 Bring together
38 Spirited horse
39 Hole in the head
40 Radiator attachment
41 Livens (up)

DOWN
1 Shows disuse
2 Set upon
3 Baking need
4 Sch. Subj.
5 Crime doer, to cops
6 God of light

7 Enter town, like a gunslinger
8 Designer's asset
10 Elk feature
11 Rotisserie part
16 Put in other words
18 Enjoy a novel
21 Fabric worker
23 Standing
24 Handled
25 Wise sayings
27 Like some skiing
28 Get together
29 Camera feature
30 Winter glider
31 Lock of hair
33 Run off
37 Wee bite

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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

G	R	O	B	A	N		O	M	E	N
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT