

We must curb the rise of unscrupulous media

The Daily Star engages with Kamal Ahmed, journalist and head of the Media Reform Commission, for an in-depth discussion on media reform and press freedom in Bangladesh.



Kamal Ahmed

TDS: How would you evaluate the current media scenario in Bangladesh?

Kamal Ahmed (KA): Two crucial factors for press freedom are journalists' economic independence and a sustainable industry business model. When employers do not pay journalists, there is a significant risk of compromising their principles and ethical codes, which is already a widespread issue. Outside Dhaka, many journalists work for media houses without salaries or employment guarantees. This financial insecurity drives them toward economic compromises that lead to corruption and deviate from the fundamental mission of truth-telling.

Similarly, media houses without sustainable business models often rely on big businesses and the government for advertisements and financial support. This dependency creates undue influence, shielding businesses and funnelling external funds to sustain media outlets. It creates a vicious cycle that undermines

press freedom. This is a key reason for the media's failure to carry out responsible and objective journalism.

TDS: What key reform recommendations has the commission received from stakeholders?

KA: Stakeholders overwhelmingly emphasised the need for economic freedom and job security for journalists to ensure honest, independent journalism. Fair compensation from employers is crucial to reduce corruption and lobbying. Secondly, people have expressed concerns about the proliferation of unscrupulous media. A myriad of portals is popping up daily—sometimes by the hour—that have no public interest. Their main objective is to gain advantages for businesses and political power, often for political favours. This is causing serious harm to journalism. This influx of media outlets is not serving the public interest. Stakeholders stress the need to curb the unchecked rise of

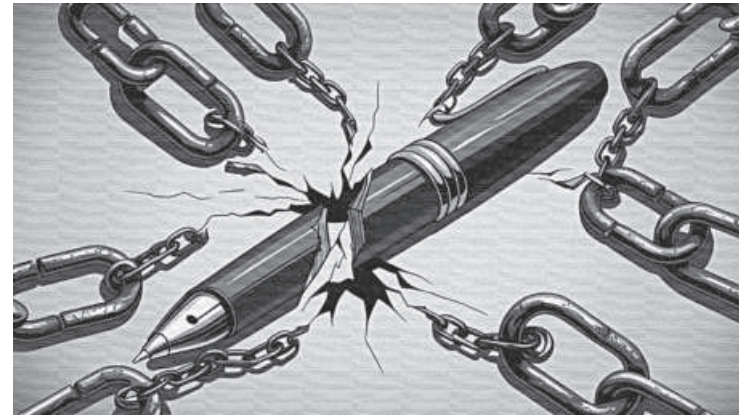


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TDS: How is the commission tackling key issues of journalists' rights, including wage board implementation, timely salaries, and risk allowances?

KA: The wage board is not within the remit of this commission, so we will not discuss it. However, we found a dominant view among working journalists outside Dhaka that they are not benefiting from the wage board. In fact, some owners falsify records to claim they are implementing the wage board, even though they are not. These owners also manipulate circulation figures to receive higher advertising rates. As a result, owners benefit, while only a few journalists see any advantage from the



PHOTO: STAR

- » Ensure journalists' economic freedom and job security to uphold honest, independent journalism. Policies should be implemented to guarantee fair wages, timely payments, and protections against financial vulnerability.
- » There is a strong call for a nationally standardised minimum wage across all media sectors.
- » Stakeholders have suggested forming a permanent media commission to assume the responsibilities of the current Press Council, with a broader focus on press freedom.
- » Questions remain about whether the market can sustain the sheer number of media outlets—46 TV channels, 22 radio stations, hundreds of newspapers, and thousands of online platforms.
- » A unified regulatory body must be established to oversee all journalists across print, television, radio, and online media. This body must be independent of government control and funding to ensure true media accountability and freedom.

unscrupulous media.

There are also questions about whether the market has the appetite for this vast number of media outlets—46 TV channels, 22 radio stations, hundreds of newspapers, and thousands of online platforms. Reforms may be necessary to remove unethical players from the industry. To inform these recommendations, we visited seven divisional headquarters, held meetings with district representatives, and engaged with hundreds of practitioners, publishers, editors, and journalists across various media sectors. These insights shaped our proposed reforms.

wage board.

Additionally, the wage board is limited to the newspaper industry and does not cover electronic media, including television channels, radio, and online outlets. There is a strong demand for a nationally accepted salary floor for the entire media industry, regardless of the type of media they work in.

TDS: The politicisation of journalists' unions often undermines their ability to negotiate effectively with media owners. What are the commission's recommendations to tackle this issue and

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