

■ INTERVIEWS ■

MEHEDI MAROF'S

journey to one of America's top journalism fellowships



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NAZRUL ISLAM MOZUMDER

Mehedi Hasan Marof, an alumnus of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), is set to join the University of Maryland's elite Investigative Journalism programme after receiving a fellowship at the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism.

His acceptance email confirmed Marof's selection for a fully-funded spot in the Master's in Data and Investigative Journalism programme at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, along with the highly coveted fellowship at the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism. Marof is one of only six students from around the globe to have received the fellowship which includes a USD 70,148 stipend over two years, full tuition coverage for the master's programme, and health insurance. But for him, it wasn't just about the funding.

Marof had also received offers from several leading journalism schools including the University of Missouri and Ohio University, both with full funding, as well as UC Berkeley and Boston University with partial tuition scholarships. But for him, Maryland stood out.

"I was looking for a hands-on programme that focuses on computation and data – things like scraping, mapping, and analysing public records," said Marof. "There is a vacuum for that kind of work in Bangladesh's media, but it's essential for high-impact investigative journalism today. What drew me to Maryland more was the fellowship at Howard Center where student fellows work alongside top-tier US journalists on exactly these kinds of projects."

From Dhaka newsrooms to global bylines

At the age of just 25, and one and a half years into journalism, Marof has already been published in global news outlets such as *Al Jazeera*, *NBC News*, *The Diplomat*, *Scroll*, *The Wire*, and *Dialogue Earth*. His reporting spans political violence, security forces misconduct, climate crisis, minority rights, and institutional failures in Bangladesh. But his path wasn't paved through privilege. "I didn't come from a media family or have elite connections," he said. "Everything I have done is built on brainstorming, finding the right editors, and emailing and pitching to them, the majority of which went unnoticed."

Marof's journey started in Dhaka with *The Business Standard's* online news desk when he was an undergraduate

student. He eventually moved to *Netra News*. His reporting, sometimes on sensitive or risky topics, earned him praise but also put him under a lot of pressure.

"I am particularly proud of how I covered the July uprising as a journalist," he said. "I was filing stories for multiple international outlets, tracking the protests in real-time, and became a source of ground information for over a dozen media outlets worldwide. I also appeared in on-air interviews with *The Independent*, *BBC World Service*, and *ABC Australia*."

Rooted in ULAB

Marof graduated from ULAB in 2023 with a CGPA of 3.98 and the Summa Cum Laude distinction. He also received the highest academic awards from both the university's Vice Chancellor and his school's Dean.

"ULAB gave me the space to grow," he said. "It taught me to think critically, to question, and to report fairly. The mentorship I received there helped me sharpen my skills not just as a journalist, but as a person."

Marof's interest in data-driven investigative journalism also began at ULAB.

"We had a Data Journalism course," he said. "Even though it was an introductory one, the course sparked something in me. I realised how data, open-source techniques, and interactive storytelling can elevate a well-reported story to a whole new level."

The application phase

Before he even started his application, Marof spent months considering where to apply. It's a crucial decision, he said, as it depends on what you want to do in the next few years, whether it's in academia or the newsroom.

"A lot of journalism schools in the US are actually part of communications departments, which are often research-heavy and academic in nature," he explained. "They are great if you want to teach or go into the communication sector. But if you want to be out in the field – digging through records and participating in investigative projects – only a handful of programmes are built for that. And those practice-based programmes are expensive. Most don't offer funding. There are often no teaching assistantships at these programmes because of their intensive, hands-on nature."

That's why getting full funding from Maryland and the fellowship felt even more meaningful for Marof.

When it came to preparing the application materials, Marof said that he kept his statement of purpose (SOP) straightforward and honest.

"Graduate programmes, especially in practice-driven journalism, want to see that you have done some work and aspire to do more," he said. "They want to know that you have met deadlines, made ethical decisions in your reporting method, and filed stories under pressure. Most importantly, they look for a genuine interest in learning and contributing. Your individual story matters."

In his application, Marof had shared why he entered journalism, what he had done so far, and linked a few key stories. His aim was to communicate his commitment to amplifying underreported issues. Hence, the writing samples he submitted weren't chosen based on the outlet but for their significance and impact.

Among the writing samples Marof provided with his application, one was published in *Al Jazeera* that investigated violence tied to student politics after a shuffle in power. This particular story was picked up and carried by dozens of media outlets across South Asia, including *Prothom Alo* and *Times of India*. Another, for *Dialogue Earth*, examined how climate disasters were pushing rural families to marry off their daughters early.

"I wanted them to see that I care, dig deep, stay with stories even when they get complicated, and remain fair to all subjects," he said. "You don't need bylines in *Al Jazeera* or *NBC*. But you do need depth. They should be able to understand your methods by reading your work. Show that you're not afraid of difficult questions or tough circumstances."

What comes next

When asked about the future, Marof's answer was simple.

"I want to tell stories that matter, stories that serve the public interest, resonate globally, and give voice to the voiceless," he said. "I hope to work alongside the best in the business and contribute to investigations that change lives."

Eventually, Marof hopes to return to the classroom.

"Maybe twenty years from now, I will be teaching in a Journalism school," he said. "I would love to pass on what I have learned while reporting to the next generation of journalists."

Nazrul is a Campus Ambassador for The Daily Star from ULAB.