

When will the news media dare to question itself?



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In Bangladesh, conversations about press freedom are constant, but discussions about the media's own accountability and transparency are far less frequent. Journalists often claim that state control, lawsuits, intimidation, attacks, blackouts, dependence on advertising, and political ownership or influence hinder their ability to work freely. But citizens may also raise an equally valid concern: if the government is not regulating the media, then who will?

This leads to an uncomfortable question. How often does a media house step before its audience and confront its own mistakes, biases, financial interests, or the pressures that influence its reporting? This lack of a culture of self-examination is the most fragile aspect of our media environment. That is where the idea of self-regulation emerges—not as censorship, but as a form of responsibility.

During the 2024 mass uprising, many journalists were assaulted on the streets, their equipment smashed, while many faced lawsuits and arrests. The internet shutdown halted the flow of information entirely. Many outlets could not publish the truth, not only because the internet was down but also because some owners blocked stories or because journalists themselves feared internal or external consequences. Later, when the interim government cancelled accreditation cards of 167 journalists, the Editors' Council described it as a direct attack.

For these reasons, the formation of the Media Reform Commission in late 2024 seemed like an opportunity for real change. It recommended an independent media commission, legal protection for journalists, transparency in ownership, fair wages, and a framework to rebuild public trust. However, discussions later revealed that the central recommendation—establishment of an independent commission—might be removed from the draft. If that indeed happens, the entire reform process could be meaningless as self-regulation depends on supervision



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

by a truly independent third party.

Self-regulation is a moral and accountable means through which the media makes itself responsible to the public. When done correctly, it strengthens press freedom rather than weakens it. In countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Ireland, Slovenia, and South Africa, these bodies accept complaints, hold open hearings, issue public rulings, and compel news organisations to correct mistakes or issue apologies.

The question for us is simple: do we want a media that only questions others, or a media that also dares to question itself?

India also has a Press Council but because its rulings are not binding, the system exists more in form than in effect. Pakistan's state-run regulator prioritises

the ruling party's interests over journalistic freedom. Bangladesh's Press Council is barely discussed. It has a code of conduct but very few media outlets appear to follow it. Meanwhile, the number of journalists who actually entered the profession by completing the formal K-form registration process remains unclear. Under the 1974 law, Press Council journalists are legally categorised as "public servants"—a rare designation for members

may lodge a concern, and hearings and decisions are made openly and transparently. Punishments must be proportionate and justified, and all rulings must be published regularly so that the public can observe real progress.

An additional layer is also essential given Bangladesh's unique context: financial and administrative transparency. Media houses can be truly independent only when their

often unable to prevent misinformation. Their economic security is therefore not merely a humane demand; it is a basic condition for a democratic information system.

Some ask why media owners would ever accept self-regulation. The answer lies in the changing nature of the news market. A growing segment of the audience today does not simply consume news; they also verify it. They know when a report is propaganda or when an advertisement is disguised as journalism. Credibility has become a valuable asset. In many European countries, when self-regulation is strong, readership and advertising revenue increase, because people trust outlets that publicly admit mistakes. Good journalism is ultimately a good investment. The question is how long it will take Bangladeshi media owners, editors, and reporters to accept this simple truth.

With the 13th national election approaching, a wave of misinformation and deepfakes is already around the corner. The government or the Election Commission alone cannot manage this challenge. Instead of blaming social media influencers as "non-journalists," the responsibility for checking misinformation must begin with the mainstream press, whose own political divisions often undermine professionalism. This responsibility should not be handed over to the state.

Bangladesh now needs a practical roadmap. To make progress within the next three months, the first step is to establish a new, independent, multi-stakeholder Press Council. A single national code of ethics must be announced for all media outlets, and an online complaints portal must be launched to allow direct public participation. Every three months, a Media Accountability Report should be published, listing complaints, rulings, corrections, and outlets that failed to comply. Major media houses should appoint ombudspersons. A journalist protection law must also be introduced to make any attacks and harassing lawsuits punishable. And decisions such as cancelling press cards must be transferred from government hands to an independent oversight body.

At the heart of these reforms lies one principle: without fair wages, safety, and professional protection for journalists, no policy will endure. Equally importantly, desired transformation will come when the media welcomes critical scrutiny and ensures its own accountability to the public. When this happens, only then can we say that our media is not only free but also responsible.

Ducusu should be able to play a stronger role in ensuring quality food

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MD ASHIKUR RAHMAN and SADMAN MUJTABA RAFID

In Bangladesh's public universities, a "balanced meal" often means striking a balance between hunger and the risk of food poisoning. Shukanta (not his real name), a Master's student at Dhaka University, recently suffered from diarrhoea after consuming unhealthy food regularly at a residential hall. This is not an isolated incident; unfortunately, low-quality meals, sometimes accompanied by "high-protein insects," have long been a hallmark of dining halls at our public universities. The situation has always held a remarkable "consistency" regardless of which government was in power.

In 2023, a research study conducted by Professor Dr Sharmin Rumi Alim et al. in the Dhaka University canteens and cafeteria found alarmingly high bacterial counts, including E. coli, a bacterium responsible for diarrhoea, as well as evidence of faecal contamination. These findings reflect the

broader condition of canteens across most, if not all, public university halls. It has been a long-standing challenge, with complaints often unheard and unanswered.

Strong student bodies can potentially play an effective role in improving this grim scenario. However, historically, student bodies like the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) have been highly politicised and have tended to prioritise national politics over student welfare. This year's Ducsu election was held almost six years after the last one, coming as it did with sky-high expectations from stakeholders, particularly the general students. Nevertheless, structural and political barriers remain prevalent. Despite being a legally elected body, Ducsu remains institutionally handicapped.

The newly elected vice-president of Surja Sen Hall recently faced backlash after highlighting malpractices by the hall's canteen authority, including improper serving attire and unhygienic food. He fined them Tk 3,000 as a warning and threatened to shut down canteen activities if the situation did not improve. Another incident took place at Shahid Sergeant Zahurul Huq Hall, where the newly elected general secretary fined a canteen owner Tk 1,000 after spotting Monosodium Glutamate (MSG), popularly known as "tasting salt," during an inspection.

Both the university authority and the

student representatives from different political bodies criticised these actions. "Hall union leaders have no authority to impose fines or interfere directly with canteen operations. That is solely the domain of the hall administration," the university proctor, Professor Saifuddin Ahmed, told a national daily.

Then how can student bodies like Ducsu play an effective role in ensuring students' welfare on campus?

Article 5 (a) of the Ducsu constitution grants the university's vice-chancellor (union president) unconditional authority over the elected student body, including the power to suspend the body or veto any of its decisions. It states:

"The President shall have power at any time, in the best interest of the Union, to dismiss any office bearer or member of the Executive Committee or to dissolve the Executive Committee as a whole and call for a fresh election or take such other action as he thinks fit for the running of the Union. The President may suspend the Union for such a period as he thinks fit, subject to the approval of the Syndicate of the University."

There is not even a single line in the 30-page constitution about proper nutrition and hygienic meals for either resident or non-resident students. This disempowering constitutional framework is often justified

by the lack of capacity and motivation of the elected members of the Ducsu. On the other hand, student leaders affiliated with a ruling regime receive the administration's patronage and "blessings." For instance, during the previous regime, hall canteen authorities often justified the poor quality of food by claiming they had to pay "protection money" to ruling party-affiliated student leaders. This brings us back to square one, where general students—the silent, sidelined majority stakeholders—are kept from exercising their fundamental rights. The constitutional structure, combined with student leaders' lack of power, allows incompetent authorities to exercise unilateral power over what thousands of students consume daily.

We can learn from similar initiatives in similar contexts. For example, in October 2025, at IIT Kharagpur in India, the university administration formed an 8-member hygiene and food monitoring task force headed by the president of its student body. They are meant to prepare and submit monthly reports to the authorities, recommend corrective actions, penalties, or temporary closures in the event of non-compliance, and conduct awareness and training sessions for vendors on hygiene and food safety practices.

Likewise, the Ducsu constitution should be reformed to ensure its effective participation in student welfare activities.

Irregularities in the student union elections risk representatives becoming involved with hall or canteen authorities for personal gain. No individual member of Ducsu should be allowed to impose penalties; rather, any decision to penalise canteen vendors should be made by the Ducsu body's majority. To determine any penalties, Ducsu must provide clear evidence of adulteration.

General students, on the other hand, should be allowed to run small shops and ventures in allocated spaces at little to no charge. This will not only increase the supply of quality food but can also be a source of income for many students who struggle to finance their education.

In addition, mobile courts should be allowed in hall canteens in collaboration with the Ducsu and hall authorities to monitor and punish the accused under existing laws. In fact, at Rajshahi University, the mobile court operation at the request of students and authorities received positive feedback. Besides, the terms and conditions under which the canteens are leased should be made public to ensure transparency and accountability.

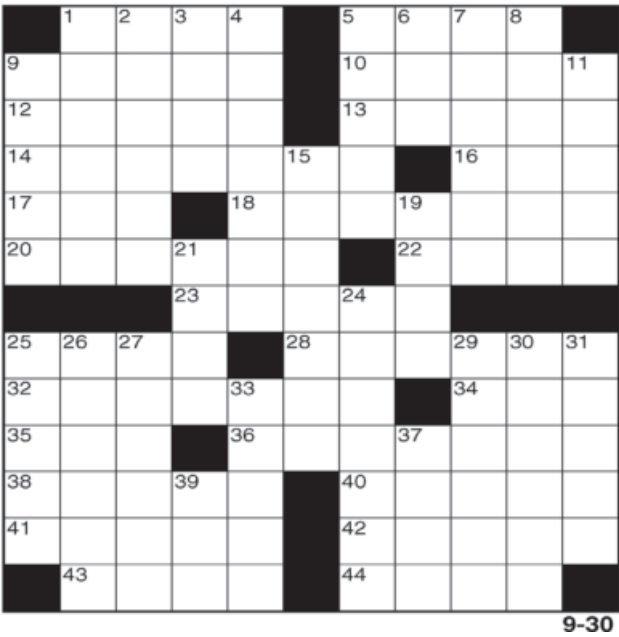
Food quality is just one area where student bodies like Ducsu can play a useful role. A fairly elected body, combined with an empowering constitution, can help fulfil students' aspirations through their leaders.

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