

INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT (IEA)



“Mapping of Bangladesh’s media landscape with a focus on youth, women, and persons with disabilities with the objective of enhancing their engagement in the country’s elections and political processes.”

Conducted By

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The study titled 'Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) — Mapping Bangladesh's media landscape with a focus on youth, women, and persons with disabilities to enhance their engagement in the country's elections and political processes' is carried out for Internews, a not-for-profit organization working for the capacity building of the local media. The research team is indebted to the communities, especially the youth, women, and people with disabilities who kindly shared their perspectives on their media exposure and information needs around election and politics. In addition, several journalists, youth leaders and civil society organizations were open to discussing their experiences, opinions and suggestions with us. We are very thankful to them. The study team would like to record deep gratitude towards the Internews Bangladesh team as well as the international experts for their valuable guidelines and insights.

The study findings facilitate Internews Bangladesh to plan and implement a pragmatic course of campaign activities for disseminating true and adequate information on election and politics that capacitate the target groups to choose their representatives. The study findings will help to design training and workshops for the media people covering elections and politics. The findings will also provide Internews and its partners with an overview of the state of mis/disinformation and the level of awareness among communities. This will result in designing future activities for diverse groups like civil society, youth, women leaders, local journalists, etc., to combat the menace of mis/disinformation.



Acronym/Abbreviations

AAPOR	The American Association for Public Opinion Research
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CBO	Community Based Organizations
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CEPPS	Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening
DFP	Department of Films and Publications
DG	Director General
ED	Executive Director
EVM	Electronic Voting Machine
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gender Diverse People
IEA	Information Ecosystem Assessment
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
KII	Key Informant Interview/Key Informant Interviewee
Mis-/Disinformation	Misinformation and Disinformation
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
PSU	Primary Sampling Unit
PWD	People with Disability
TG	Target Group

Executive Summary

Bangladesh is undergoing democratic deterioration despite its triumphant march towards socio-economic progress. According to ‘Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)’ Institute of Sweden, the country is experiencing a decline in liberal and electoral democracy. Bangladesh is ranked 147th among 179 countries in the ‘Liberal Democracy Index’ and 131st in the ‘Electoral Democracy Index’ down from the previous year.¹ The [Freedom of the Press Index](#) prepared by ‘Reporters without Borders’ shows the country is backsliding, in 2023 Bangladesh ranked 163rd, out of 180 countries, down from 162nd in 2022.² One-party dominance, implementation of the draconian Digital Security Act 2018, Official Secrecy Act 1923, the Penal Code 1860, and other repressive colonial laws are a few obstacles to the pathways of democracy and media freedom. The Bangladesh media is undergoing transitions in management and ownership, change of audience, shifting technology, evolving internet-based media; the need for digital skills to manage social media dynamics, and declining trend of press freedom.

In this context, *Internews*, an international non-profit organization, that contributes to empowering local media and civil society to facilitate the flourishing of democracy and citizen rights, has commissioned an Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) in Bangladesh with funding support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The overall objective of the study is to understand Bangladesh’s media landscape, analyze the target groups’ i.e., the women, youth, and people with disabilities (PWD) media and information consumption habits and needs particularly around political and electoral process, as well as identify potential actors that focus on serving the information needs of the target groups and map out the flow of disinformation. The assessment facilitates *Internews* and its partners to better inform and engage Bangladesh citizens and civil society groups in elections and political processes, through creating a healthy, dynamic, and transparent information environment that will empower citizens to make better-informed decisions, bridge divides, participate effectively in their communities, and hold power to account.

The IEA applies a mixed method approach incorporating a questionnaire survey on 480 respondents, including 293 women, 149 youth³ and 38 PWDs. In addition, the team conducted 20 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with diverse groups consisting of youth, women, local media, civil society, and marginalized groups; as well as 40 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to capture qualitative perspectives of the community’s media exposure habits, their information needs around the election, and the level of awareness on mis-/disinformation and hate speech.



Community access to media/ownership of devices: The survey reveals that 79% of respondents possess a TV set, 85% smartphones, and 74% feature phones.⁴ Only 14.6% of respondents buy newspapers while radio and magazines are the least accessed media. Comparative ownership of smartphones shows the youth have the highest rates with 96.6%, while 82% women and 63% of PWDs own smartphones — depicting a disparity in terms of smartphone ownership. Regarding challenges/barriers to access to media, about 62% of respondents mentioned lack of access to quality internet; 21% report financial insolvency, while 19.6% note poor infrastructure and roads hinder communication.⁵

Access to the internet: The IEA survey shows that 59% of youth, 50% of women, and 34% of PWDs have regular connectivity — revealing a disparity in access for marginalized groups.

Access to social media: Youth have the highest use of online news portals and social media with 61.7% and 83% respectively while 34% women use online news portals and 46% use social media. Only 18% of PWDs use online news portals and 29% use social media as information sources. This depicts a clear disparity for PWDs in use of the online news portals and the social media. Of social media platforms/apps, Facebook is most widely used by survey respondents at 68%, 65% extensively use YouTube, while WhatsApp and Imo are both used by the 36% respondents, and TikTok by 27%.

Community exposure to media and contents: In terms of daily use, television is the most popular information source at 56% of responses, followed by social media with 45% of responses. Out of the 170 participants, 35% used interpersonal communication channels.⁶ Interpersonal channels are favored by PWD (74%), women (60%), and youth (56%). KII and FGDs with local journalists mention that across age, gender, and education, people prefer audio-visual content such as short films, dramas, documentaries, and promos.




Mis-/Disinformation: Only 36.5% of respondents understand the issue of misinformation, while 38% incorrectly define the issues, and more than 25% do not know about the misinformation.⁷ Conversely, about 58% respondents reported understanding the issue of disinformation. Of the respondents, 46% view Facebook as the primary source of spreading mis-/disinformation. According to FGDs and KIIs with media and CSOs, countering disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech is still a new phenomenon to most of Bangladesh's civil society, and they lack the skills and experience to deal with these issues. Only a few mainstream news media conduct fact-checking training and workshops for their staff to help identify fake information. The study reveals insufficient election reporting, particularly the investigative ones, resulting from journalists' inadequate understanding of election reporting and dearth of support from the media organizations.

Fair coverage of political news:

Election and media: According to the IEA survey, 58% of people agree the media's fair coverage of political news can facilitate them to understand political issues and affairs well and select their representative properly. However, media content is not fair all the time. According to 68% respondents, the media does not provide equal coverage to all political leaders/electoral candidates. Out of the respondents who perceive that media does not provide equal coverage to candidates, more than 72% of responses point towards pressures from vested interest groups and the news media's political affiliation. According to 77% of respondents, television is the most trusted media for receiving political and electoral news, while the social media platform, Facebook is preferred by 40% of respondents.

Media accuracy and impartiality: According to 69% of respondents, news media are 'somewhat accurate' meaning there are gaps in terms of media accuracy. On the other hand, the news media, in the view of 76% respondents, are 'somewhat impartial' in presenting the political and electoral news. The FGD and KII findings reveal that the dearth of skills, particularly in covering in-depth election reports and fact-checking, along with the political affiliation of the media in Bangladesh and pressures from powerful groups (such as corporate elites, law-enforcing agencies, and the government administration) as well as journalists' own political ideology, are the key factors hindering media accuracy and impartiality.

Media literacy: Basic literacy is considered a precursor to media literacy,⁸ and according to the Population and Housing Census 2022, the literacy rate in Bangladesh stands at approximately 75%.⁹ With these statistics in mind, it is understandable that a significant majority of respondents (80%) rely on television as their primary source of information.¹⁰ The KII findings further emphasize the severe lack of media literacy in Bangladesh, which is evident in the IEA survey examining the level of awareness regarding the use of newly emerged social media platforms and the prevalence of mis-/disinformation.

Who prefers?	What media?	How much?	Major info needs on election
	Television channels	80%	Safety and security, especially for the women, senior citizen and PWDs; voting procedure using EVM; punishment for violation of electoral rules; disqualifications for elections; candidates' qualities and contributions to society.
	Interpersonal communication channels/platforms	74%	
	Social media	83%	

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, the news media is fractured and there is a lack of coordination. In general, there are no standard practices for operational procedures and media management; rather each media group has their own structure regarding recruitment, promotion, salary, and fringe benefits, which is a barrier to establishing industry standards that promote journalistic professionalism.¹¹ In a more liberal atmosphere, the news media, serving as the watchdogs for society, can generally play a role in the process of democratization. There is a strong link observed between the political affiliations of the news media and their content coverage. Additional challenges to press freedom in Bangladesh include the pressures exerted by vested interest groups such as religious extremists, corporations, ad agencies, law enforcement agencies, restrictive laws, and power elites. These factors have contributed to an increase in self-censorship, a lack of comprehensive editorial policy, and a prevailing commercial and feudalistic mindset among most owners.¹²

Easily accessible and with billions of users, social and digital media platforms are prime targets for spreading mis-/disinformation and hate speech, which sometimes spark violence and lead to communal strife and disharmony, vandalism, attacks and even killings. In this reality, fact-checking has become indispensable for both the media and civil society groups. However, fact checking is still nascent in Bangladesh and requires training journalists in techniques and tactics for tackling mis-/disinformation. The IEA finds that neither journalists nor civil society members have the adequate knowledge or skills to fact check and properly manage emerging issues of mis-/disinformation, hate speech, online violence, and cyber security. The IEA also

reveals disparities in access and exposure to digital and social media, among marginalized communities, including PWDs, women and religious minorities. The following recommendations seek to bridge these gaps in Bangladesh's mediascape.

Recommendations

- Internews, through its partners or in collaboration with the government organizations like the Press Institute Bangladesh or with the Universities can arrange nationwide capacity building training and workshops on fact-checking, election reporting, investigative reporting, etc. for both journalists and the civil society.
- Internews through its partners should form a strong advocacy group with a view to repeal the objectionable clauses of the draconian laws like the Digital Security Act 2018 which is expected to be transformed to Cyber Security Act, Official Secrets Act 1923, and the Penal Code 1860 that hinder investigative journalism in Bangladesh.
- Internews through its partners/relevant government departments can produce audio-visual contents around election i.e., voting procedure, citizen rights, safety and security measures taken by the election commission for women and PWDs and disseminate through mainstream news and social and digital media platforms to foster awareness among the targeted groups.
- Youth should be trained in media literacy and fact-checking to become social media leaders capable of organizing peers and combating mis-/disinformation.
- Internews, through its partners/relevant government departments, can encourage paid ads and audio-visual content on election rules, procedures, code of conduct, safety measures for women, PWDs, and senior citizens through popular social media, TV channels, and group communication platforms.
- Internews should coordinate with NGOs to identify best practices around PWDs access to information and media literacy to bridge the gap of their access to media content.
- Internews through its partners should hold dialogues with the mobile network operators and their regulatory bodies to improve the networking system, and minimize the network charges for the PWDs, women and other marginalized people.
- Facilitate the establishment of a sustainable youth network focused on developing media literacy skills, particularly in social and digital media so that they can contribute to combatting mis-/disinformation and maintain communal harmony.

Chapter One:

The Study Settings

Democracy in Bangladesh is undergoing a transformation. Over the last decade, democratic backsliding has prompted many citizens to disengage from formal politics. Although the survey data suggests that many Bangladeshis are satisfied with development and economic trends, other evidence shows that the public has become disinterested in politics and is losing faith in political parties. Between 1991 and 2008, voter turnout during national elections rose steadily to 87%, but has precipitously declined since 2008. Although data on voter turnout is not readily available, nonpartisan estimates for voter turnout in the 2014 and 2018 elections did not surpass 50%. The Bangladesh public's disengagement from politics and elections, particularly among youth, women, and PWD — along with the weakness of reform in both parties — perpetuates the status quo.

Women face specific barriers to participating and advancing in politics. Women's families often actively discourage them from becoming involved in politics, and Bangladesh's violent and corrupt politics deter many women from participating. In the last national election, 18 women won in their constituencies and became the members of the Parliament.¹³ In Bangladesh's conservative religious society, politics is viewed as a male domain unsuitable for women. Women that win seats or join political parties often face challenges in rising to leadership positions. Male leaders often doubt women's political capacity and relegate women to minor party positions. Together, these dynamics depress women's interest and participation in politics, which has produced a political system dominated by male voices and perspectives.

1.1 Conceptual Underpinning: What is the Information Ecosystem Assessment?

In this context, *Internews*, an international non-profit organization, working to support and amplify the voice local media internationally, felt the need to have empirical database, as part of its advocacy with the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) and its partners. As part of the USAID-funded NAGORIK project, Internews conducted an IEA in Bangladesh. The IEA focused on youth, women, and people with disabilities who have limited access to information, especially regarding political and electoral processes. By adopting a human-centered approach, *Internews* aimed to understand how communities in different

local contexts discover, exchange, value, trust, and disseminate information.

This IEA examines information access, needs, and flows, identifying trust and influence among diverse populations. The goal is to create transparent information environments that empower citizens, bridge divides, foster community participation, and promote accountability. The objective of the IEA is to help *Internews* and CEPPs partners to 1) establish a baseline study to evaluate the potential change resulting from activities; 2) adapt existing strategies and design new activities; 3) inform future media development strategy; and 4) enhance citizen engagement in elections and political processes.

Leveraging the findings, *Internews*, in collaboration with CEPPS, aims to improve media capacity in reporting electoral issues, combating disinformation, and disseminating relevant information to target communities. By doing so, they can better uphold the people's voice and strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, while designing interventions to meet information needs and amplify marginalized voices in democracy and elections.

1.2 Research Objectives

The major objectives of the IEA include:

- Mapping Bangladesh's media landscape including legal frameworks, mobile and data penetration, information providers, media outlets, ownership, funding, political inclination, and target audience.
- Analyze the target groups media consumption habits and needs of the target group, focusing on political and electoral processes, barriers to access information, and specific community information needs.
- Identifying barriers to access to information among target groups identified by *Internews*, for example mobile and/or internet penetration.
- Pinpointing the differences in needs and habits between the different target groups mentioned above, in different areas in Bangladesh.
- Contributing to developing key messages as part of media literacy campaigns.
- Identifying potential actors that focus on serving the information needs of our target groups. Identifying groups representing and working with youth, rural women and people with disabilities, media outlets, local journalists, and information providers.
- Mapping disinformation flows, analyze information delivery across diverse media

channels during elections, and examine how election-related disinformation spreads online and offline.

- Assessing community trust in media and communication channels, understanding their impact on knowledge, attitudes, and practices, and identifying actors meeting the information needs of target groups: youth, rural women, PWD, local journalists, and CSOs.

1.3 Study Methods and Materials

Internews's Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) is designed to identify how information flows through communities. Whether it is by word of mouth, through trusted community leaders, local media, social media and/or other “info-mediaries,” the point of doing such assessments is to identify the most effective formats and channels to use when designing two-way communication strategies and feedback loops to meet the identified information needs. Information Ecosystem Assessments recognize that media outlets are just one source of information in communities, and so they seek to understand local information ecosystems more broadly from the point of view of the information consumer. An IEA assesses all the factors that govern information needs, access, sourcing, movement, uptake and impact in an ecosystem in much greater depth.

The research methodology employs a combined qualitative and quantitative approach, examining the supply and demand aspects of media relevant to Bangladesh's elections. The supply side analysis encompasses the national and community media landscape, evaluating traditional and digital media, the media industry environment, legal regulations, and media capabilities. In addition to assessing the capacity of media outlets, the study also focuses on the community's demand side of the information ecosystem, considering informal, cultural, and social factors that impact information needs, access, sharing, trust, influence, and information literacy. These factors have the potential to disrupt or corrupt community information flows through the spread of rumors, misinformation, and propaganda.

The research methodology applied is a combination of an interactive, action-oriented, do no harm approach. Data collection followed ethical standards and allowed the equal participation of male and female youth, adults, and people with disability, especially those in remote areas. Initial data was collected through rigorous desk research, utilizing relevant literature, such as media reports, research articles, the Preliminary Census Report 2022 from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Bangladesh Labor Force Survey Reports, and relevant printed reports and books. Findings from the desk review informed the research questions used informed Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Data was then gathered through a survey, FGD, and KII. The data collected facilitated effective analysis, enabling the research team to triangulate and study the country's information flow and election-related information disorder. Internews and the partners jointly decided on the criteria for the selection of the locations, considering the size of populations and the issues around access to information. *Internews*, the IEA expert, and partners decided on the research design and methodology together, putting into consideration both organizations' experience and history relevant to the local context and key issues.

1.4 Survey Data Collection

The team carried out a questionnaire survey. The survey adheres to a robust statistical standard¹⁴ and includes a diverse sample size representing various regions, age groups, genders, education and occupational backgrounds, income groups, and persons with disabilities. To ensure diversity, the study team selected four divisions for assessment: Barishal, Chattogram, Dhaka (the capital), and Mymensingh. Chattogram serves as the business capital and is the second largest division, Mymensingh is the newest division with low literacy rates, and Barishal is a coastal zone with diverse geographic, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics.



Two IEA data enumerators were captured during conducting sample surveys at Dighinala Upazila of Khagrachari district under Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Internews/Niloy Chakrobarty*

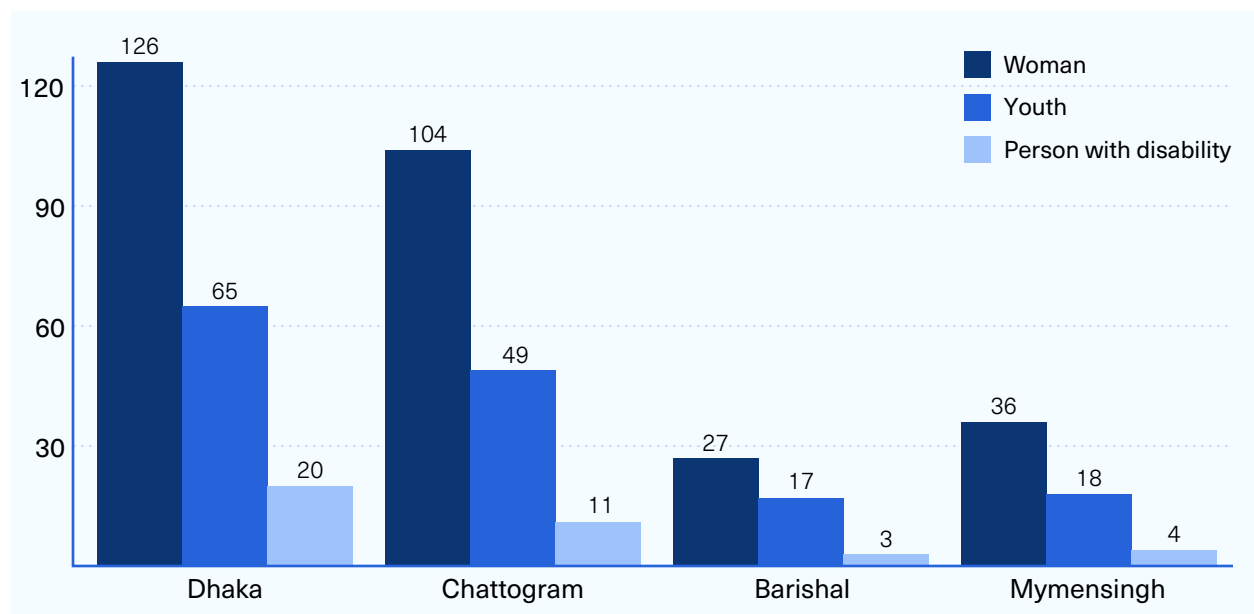
According to the preliminary report on the 2022 population and housing census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the selected divisions have a total of 497,73,981 women, 217,11,390 youth, and 12,541, 77 persons with disabilities (PWD). Women constitute 50% of the total population, while the exact demographic information for youth (aged 18-29) is not available but estimated to be around 22%. Persons with disabilities make up less than 2% of the population. The sample population for the survey was 328 for women, 143 for youth, and only 9 for PWD. To account for the small number of PWD, their population was adjusted by allocating 10% of the total sample size from the women category, resulting in a total of 42. After adjustment, the sample sizes for each category are as follows:

Table 1. Target group sample distribution

TG Category	Planned		Covered	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Women	295	61%	293	61%
Youth	143	30%	149	31%
Persons with disability (PWD)	42	9%	38	8%
Total	480	100.0	480	100.0

The survey utilized a multi-staged sampling approach, with sample sizes proportionate to each location’s size. Starting at the national level, sampling progressed through divisions, districts, sub-districts (upazilas), unions, and villages. Among the 480 respondents, the largest group (211 or 44%) hailed from Dhaka division, followed by 164 (34%) from Chattogram division, 58 (12%) from Mymensingh division, and 47 (10%) from Barishal division. Each division had two selected districts-the divisional district itself and another district considering the factors like distance, urban and rural characteristics.

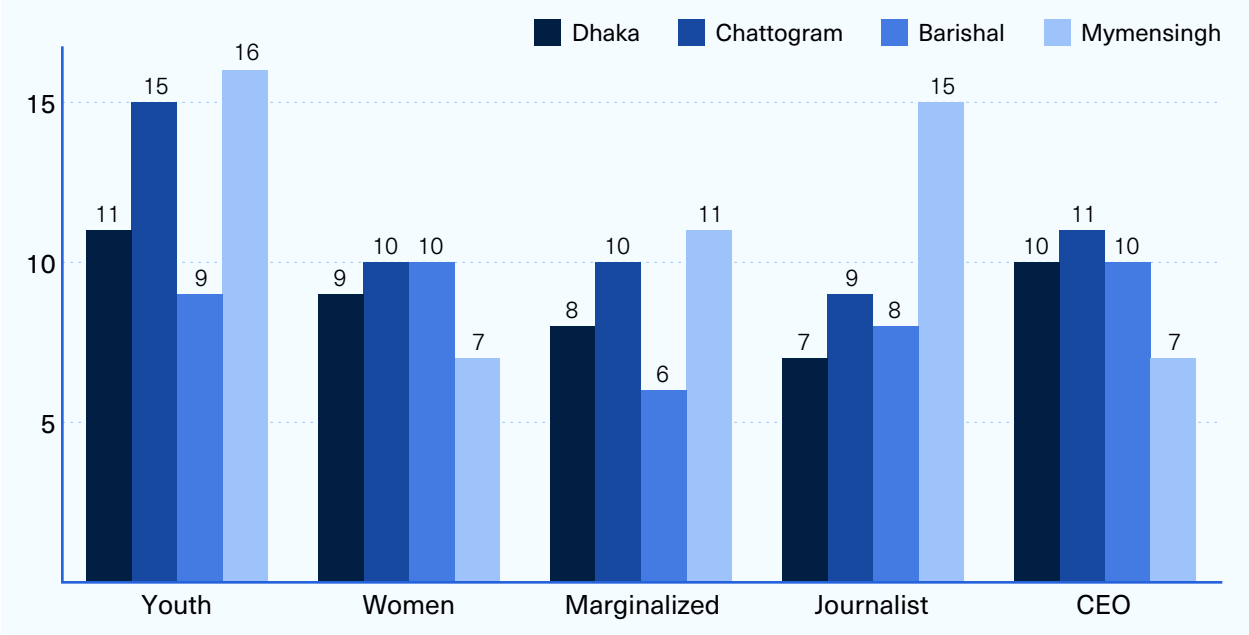
Figure 1. Distribution of sample as per division



1.5 Selection of Individual Respondents

For effective data collection, the research team faced the challenge of determining the starting point for data collection in each primary sampling unit (PSU), which encompassed a large area such as a village or ward. Enumerators were instructed to locate the center of the PSU and visit every fifth house to find suitable respondents, following specific criteria outlined in the data collection matrix. If the desired respondents were unavailable, the data collectors proceeded to the next house. In urban areas with high population density, every 10th apartment was surveyed to identify potential participants, especially in cities like Dhaka. To ensure random sampling, PWDs were excluded, as they represented only 1.4% of the population in Bangladesh. Locating PWDs posed a significant challenge, and to overcome this, strategies such as snowball sampling and reaching out to Union Parishad (UP) members and other acquaintances were employed to identify suitable participants.

Figure 2. Distribution of FGD participants



1.6 Qualitative Approaches

To gain insights into the community’s media consumption habits, election-related information needs, social media usage, media literacy, and perceptions of media accuracy and impartiality, a comprehensive research approach was adopted. This included conducting 20 FGDs and 40 KIIs. While surveys were conducted in-person, some FGDs and KIIs took place virtually through platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. The FGDs encompassed five distinct groups: youth, women, marginalized individuals, journalists, and CSOs, with each group having their

own designated FGD. A total 199 participants, including 51 youth, 36 women, 35 marginalized individuals, 39 journalists, and 38 CSO representatives participated in the FGDs (Figure 2). KIIs were conducted with media experts, CSOs, Government officials, and women activists, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives were included in the research.

1.7 Data Gathering, Management and Analysis

Data was gathered using a systematic random sampling procedure, employing pre-designed questionnaires, and supervised by team leader and supervisors. Questionnaires, notes, and audio recordings from FDGs and KIIs were securely stored and coded. The research team diligently checked and verified the data, correcting any errors. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) was used for data analysis, determining frequency, percentage, and categorical values. Graphs and charts were generated from numerical findings for inclusion in the report.

Qualitative data that emerged from FGDs and KIIs was thematically analyzed. The team developed codes and identified dominant themes, relationships, and patterns through a systematic review. The findings were compared with existing literature and quantitative survey data to ensure comprehensive analysis. The team manually labeled concepts and organized the data to complement the survey findings. Direct quotations were highlighted to ensure accurate representation. The resulting insights were presented in the study report, supplemented, and complemented by the questionnaire survey, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

The American Association for Public Opinion Research has developed a set of comprehensive ethical standards (revised in April 2021)¹⁵ for carrying out social surveys of which a few key principles were followed to deal with the personally identifiable information (PII):

- Recognizing the right of participants to be provided with honest and forthright information about how personally identifiable information that we collect from them will be used.
- Recognizing the importance of preventing unintended disclosure of personally identifiable information. We acted in accordance with all relevant best practices, laws, regulations, and data owner rules governing the handling and storage of such information.
- Avoiding disclosing any information that could be used alone or in combination with other reasonably available information, to identify participants with their data (name, position, and any identifiable information), without participant's permission.

1.8 Study Limitations and Overcoming Strategies

The study has some limitations of which the major ones include the followings:

- The extreme cold delayed data collection in Chattogram's hilly region. The research team included enumerator from the hilly region having very good understanding of the local weather and environment who visited respondents when the weather was favorable.
- Difficulty arose in finding suitable PWD and women respondents. Snowball sampling procedure was a useful technique to reach the expected respondents. Moreover, local opinion leaders and better-informed people supported to locate the expected respondents.
- Some FGD and KII participants expressed concern or declined to participate in the study due to the sensitive nature of the subject. More motivation and persuasion were needed along with assurance of maintaining their identity as confidential.
- Data collectors faced rejection and were barred from entering certain areas. Local contact persons helped to provide access to them.
- Being unique and diverse in nature, the study should have covered more samples from more regions for better capturing data in a more comprehensive way.
- The subject of the study is very new in Bangladesh with people generally lacking understanding, particularly regarding certain terms and topics like mis-/disinformation, fact-check, etc.
- The survey was conducted in four divisions on 480 participants. Including more divisions and sample population would facilitate more comprehensive data. However, qualitative data were supportive to understand the situation effectively.

Chapter Two: IEA Findings

2.1 Bangladesh Mediascape

Bangladesh's media landscape has witnessed a significant shift towards private management, resulting in a predominance of influential outlets owned by politically affiliated corporations. While the country enjoys a wealth of news media, it is primarily urban-centered, male-dominated, and controlled by corporate entities influenced by the power elites. This transfer of media ownership took place under various political administrations, enabling corporate elites to acquire licenses and consolidate control. Bangladesh has four state-owned television channels, 45 private television channels, 28 FM and 32 community radio stations, 1,248 daily newspapers, and more than 100 online news portals.¹⁶

According to the Department of Film and Publication's report on enlisted media (dated 08 September 2022), Chattogram metropolitan city has three English dailies and 16 Bangla dailies, along with one state-run Bangladesh Radio and Television and a sub-station of Channel 24, one of the news-based corporate owned television stations. In contrast, Dhaka has 37 English dailies and 217 Bangla dailies, along with one state-run radio and three TV channels, and 45 corporate owned television stations. It is note-worthy that the community radio stations are primarily supported by the donors and development partners.¹⁷ Although the media sector is predominantly male, there has been a recent increase in visibility of female journalists in satellite TV channels and newspapers.¹⁸

In Bangladesh, TV channels can be classified into two types: general entertainment channels (GEC) with a focus on general entertainment and news-based channels featuring hourly news bulletins. Among the 45 satellite TV channels, 35 are in operation currently, of which 21 are mixed and nine are news-based. Additionally, there are five specialized channels dedicated to music, kids' issues, infotainment, business and sports.¹⁹ These channels are owned by influential corporate entities. For instance, the news-based channel 'Independent TV' is owned by the Beximco Group, while the 'News24' channel is owned by the Bashundhara Group. Similarly, leading newspapers and FM radio stations are also owned by corporations. For example, the Transcom Group, known for its business interventions in electronics and food and beverage, owns popular Bangla and English dailies like 'Prothom Alo' and 'Daily Star,' as well as 'ABC' radio; the Hameem Group, specializing in textiles and clothing, owns the prominent newspaper 'Samakal' and news-based 'Channel24;' and the Jamuna Group, involved in textiles, chemicals, and constructions, runs the leading daily 'Jugantor' and 'Jamuna TV.'²⁰ Media academics and

researchers criticize corporate ownership of media houses for exerting significant control over content, neglecting coverage of corporate malpractices and power elite corruption, and protecting vested interest groups through self-censorship.^{21 22}

2.2 Media Regulatory and Policy Frameworks

The media landscape in Bangladesh is characterized by strict laws and regulations that are seen as oppressive and restrictive to freedom of expression. The existing regulatory framework for radio and television is guided by out-dated laws and policies that fail to adapt to the evolving media landscape. Several laws, such as The Telegraph Act (1885), The Wireless Telegraphy Act (1933), and the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Act 2001, govern the radio and television industry. Print and broadcast media content is regulated by a diverse set of laws, including censorship codes and provisions outlined in legislations such as The Penal Code (1860), The Code of Criminal Procedure (1898), The Contempt of Court Act (1926), and the Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act passed in 1973, which regulates newspaper and book publication. Additionally, the Bangladesh Television, Film Censor Guidelines, and Rules (1985) dictate content regulations for television and films.²³

However, the management and operations of satellite TV channels, online news portals, and social and digital media platforms lack comprehensive legislation and policies. Despite some pending laws and policies i.e., Online Mass Media Policy (draft),²⁴ there is currently no comprehensive framework to address these new platforms.

The Ministry of Information, in collaboration with Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) holds the authority for licensing and frequency control. The BTRC Act 2001 provides guidelines for spectrum allocation to licensed operators for establishing TV stations.²⁵ FM radio broadcasting licenses are issued by the Ministry of Information, and frequency assignments follow the National Frequency Allocation Plan. The government introduced the Community Radio Installation, Transmission, and Operation Guideline in 2008 to facilitate localized information services. Terrestrial broadcasting is exclusively designated for Bangladesh Television (BTV), a state-owned entity, while private TV channels rely on satellite broadcasting.²⁶ Private radio stations operate through FM broadcasting licenses issued by the Ministry of Information.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 is widely seen as a significant threat to freedom of

expression due to its excessive empowerment of law-enforcing agencies. Section 43 of the act allows an investigation officer to conduct searches, seizures, and arrests without a warrant. It states that if a police officer believes that an offense under the act is being committed, or if evidence is at risk of being lost, destroyed, altered, or made unavailable, they may, upon recording their belief in writing, take the following measures: (a) enter and search the place, using necessary measures if obstructed; (b) seize computers, computer systems, networks, data, or other materials used in the offense; (c) search the body of any person present; and (d) arrest any person suspected of committing an offense under the act.²⁷ Consequently, investigative journalism has faced significant limitations due to the frequent harassment and punishment of journalists under the DSA, targeting reports disliked by the authorities or the masterminds.

The Right to Information Act 2009²⁸ is the result of a long-standing civil society campaign advocating for the free flow of information to the public. This act stands out from other laws as it empowers the people to hold authorities accountable by allowing them to apply this law against the state. It signifies a paradigm shift, granting individuals the right to access information and ensuring transparency. While the act recognizes the citizen's right to information, certain exceptions exist, such as information pertaining to foreign policy or confidential information received from foreign governments. Additionally, state-run institutions, particularly law enforcement agencies, are exempted from providing information upon request.

2.3 Community Access and Exposure to Media

Access to information is highly influenced by, among others, literacy rate, access to electricity, access to internet connectivity, and ownership of the devices. Findings from the literature review shows, Bangladesh has a diverse population of 159,453,001 (July 2018 est.) residing in rural, semi-urban, and urban areas, with 36.6% living in urban regions.²⁹ So, the demographic structure suggests two broad categories of media audiences in the country. There are 80 million adults (age 15+) audiences against 80 million in the urban areas, primarily Dhaka and Chattogram.³⁰ The adult literacy rate in Bangladesh was reported at 74% in 2018, with 82% of urban and 67% of rural populations being literate according to Bangladesh Statistics 2019.³¹ However, the multiple indicator cluster survey in 2019 revealed a higher literacy rate of 89% among individuals aged 15-24.³²

In terms of access to electricity, the IEA survey finds a substantial 92% of respondents reported having an electricity connection, highlighting widespread availability. Regarding internet

connectivity, 59% of youth respondents reported having an internet connection, whereas 50% of women and 34% of PWDs had access to the internet, indicating a lower rate among PWDs. Of the total sample population, 67% were from the rural area while the remaining 33% were from the urban areas. Given this context, 76% urban respondents possess internet connection while 39% rural respondents possess the same.

Figure 3.1. Ownership of Electricity and Internet by groups

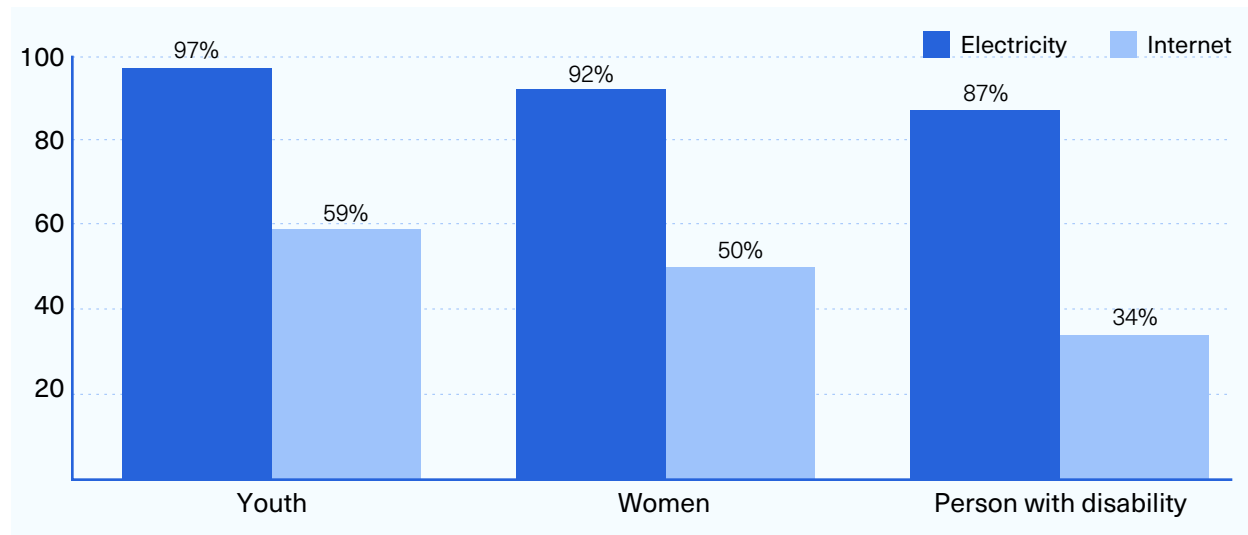


Figure 3.2. Ownership of Laptop and Desk Computer by groups

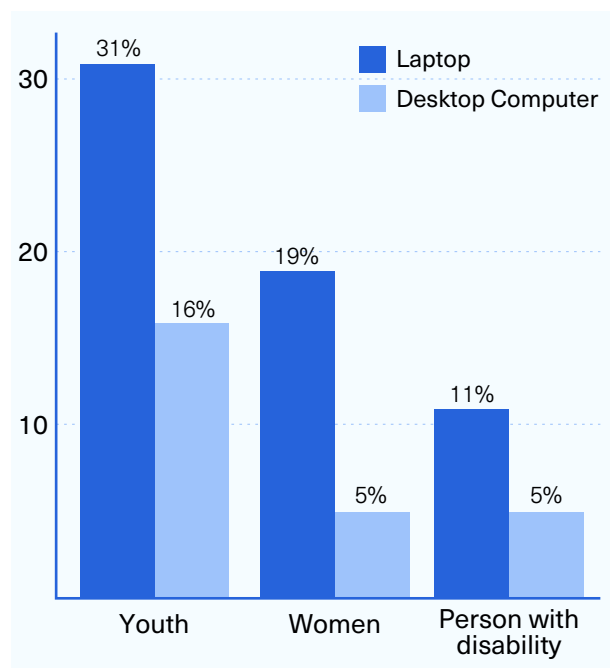
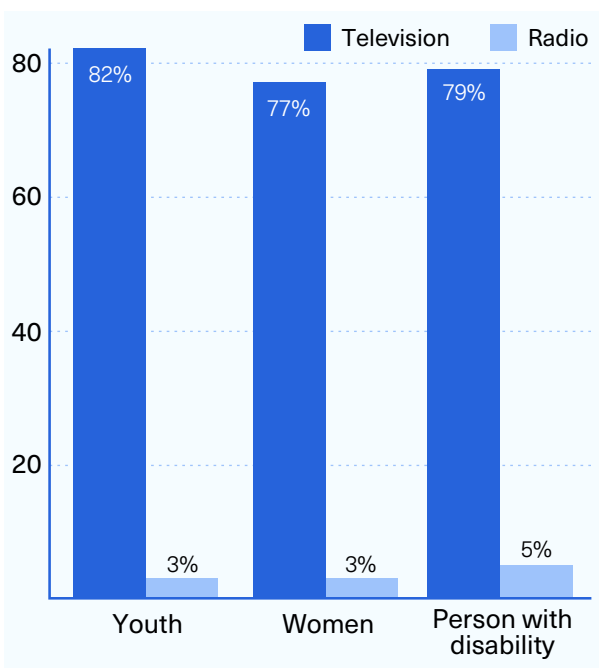


Figure 3.3. Ownership of Television and Radio by groups

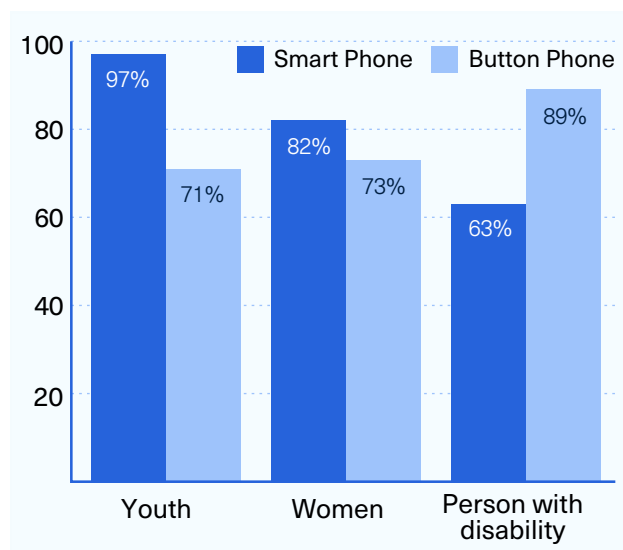


Radio, desktop computers, and laptops were less commonly owned devices accounting for less than 10% of all responses, suggesting that they are less frequently used for accessing information

compared to television and mobile phones.

In terms of communication and media-related devices, the survey found that 79% of respondents (on average) owned a TV set, emphasizing its prevalence among the population. The smart phones reached are owned by more than 80% respondents against the use of button mobile sets by 77.6 % respondents. In terms of possessing smart phones, the PWDs are the most laggards while the youth are in advanced position.

Figure 3.4. Ownership of smart phones and button phones by groups



Among daily users, as shown in (Annex 2: Table 13) Television channels emerge as the most utilized media, with 270 responses (56%). This is in line with the findings from literature review. According to estimates from the cable operators' association and private channels association, the cable network in Bangladesh has reached approximately 84% of households.³³ A national media survey indicated that televisions had 80% audiences in 2017.³⁴

Findings from the 'News Literacy Survey' conducted by MRDI in 2020 reveal that television channels serve as the primary source of news for 75% of the population while digital news media (such as Facebook, online news portals, and other social media platforms) account for 16% of the audience's primary news sources. Television channels have a significant advantage in terms of viewership due to their audio-visual nature. Studies and observations suggest that both male and female viewers opt for TV news and programs, while middle-aged literate audiences primarily rely on newspapers. This medium effectively communicates messages to individuals with limited or no formal education. With approximately one-fourth of the population being illiterate, newspapers hold little relevance for them. Instead, they heavily rely on television for information, education, and entertainment.

Digital media is the second most accessed media. The findings from the FGDs and KIIs indicate a rapid shift in media consumption habits, with audiences increasingly transitioning from traditional news media like newspapers, radio, and TV to online-based social media platforms and news portals. As smartphones become more accessible, users are connecting their devices to the internet for news, information, and entertainment. Over the last two decades, the government's 'Digital Bangladesh' campaign has driven media expansion, particularly

in digital and social media. Social and digital media have experienced spontaneous growth primarily driven by individual users and the increasing availability of smartphones.

Kemp, S. (13 February 2023) citing GSMA intelligence reports, there were about 180 million cellular mobile connections in Bangladesh at the start of 2023 and about 45 million social media users in January 2023. It is also mentioned that there were 66.94 million internet users in Bangladesh in January 2023. Kemp's analysis shows that internet users in Bangladesh increased by 691 thousand (+1.0%) between 2022 and 2023.³⁵

Today, almost all the leading newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations have web portals, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and YouTube channels. Some newspapers outside of the capital have their online news portals and e-versions too. This popularity of digital and social media is particularly true in big cities like Dhaka and Chattogram. As shown in (Annex 2: Table 13.b.) online news portals are used significantly more in Dhaka than other divisions at 54%. While Chattogram has the lowest TV use at 74% but the highest social media use at 63%, while the others average 53%. According to a male key informant in Chattogram, there is a decline in people's interest in reading newspapers due to the growing availability of internet-based news media.

IEA survey finds that, young populations heavily depend on digital and social media platforms for news and entertainment. The MRDI survey report highlights that “young adults were almost 70% more likely to choose digital news sources. This is also likely because most smartphones owners are young adults. As IEA survey finds, a significant 85% of respondents possessed smartphones, while 74% had feature phones in addition to smartphones. However, when analyzing smartphone ownership, the survey revealed that youth had an impressive 97% ownership rate, 82% of women owned smartphones, and PWDs lagged at 63% (Figure 3.4).

As shown in (Annex 2: Table 13), the use of various media and communication channels/platforms by respondents is depicted, highlighting the extent of their exposure. Among daily users, as shown in (Annex 2: Table 13) social media is the second largest media utilized, with 217 responses (45%), while interpersonal communication channels/platforms and online news portals garner 170 responses (35%) and 144 responses (30%) respectively. Facebook is the most used social media platform in Bangladesh, with 68% of respondents indicating its usage. YouTube follows closely behind, with 65% of respondents using the platform. WhatsApp and Imo are utilized by 36% of respondents, while TikTok is used by 27%. In contrast, the usage of Instagram and Twitter is relatively low, with only 18% and 13.5% of respondents using these platforms respectively. Additionally, 29% of respondents reported using news apps or

websites (Annex 2: Table 30).

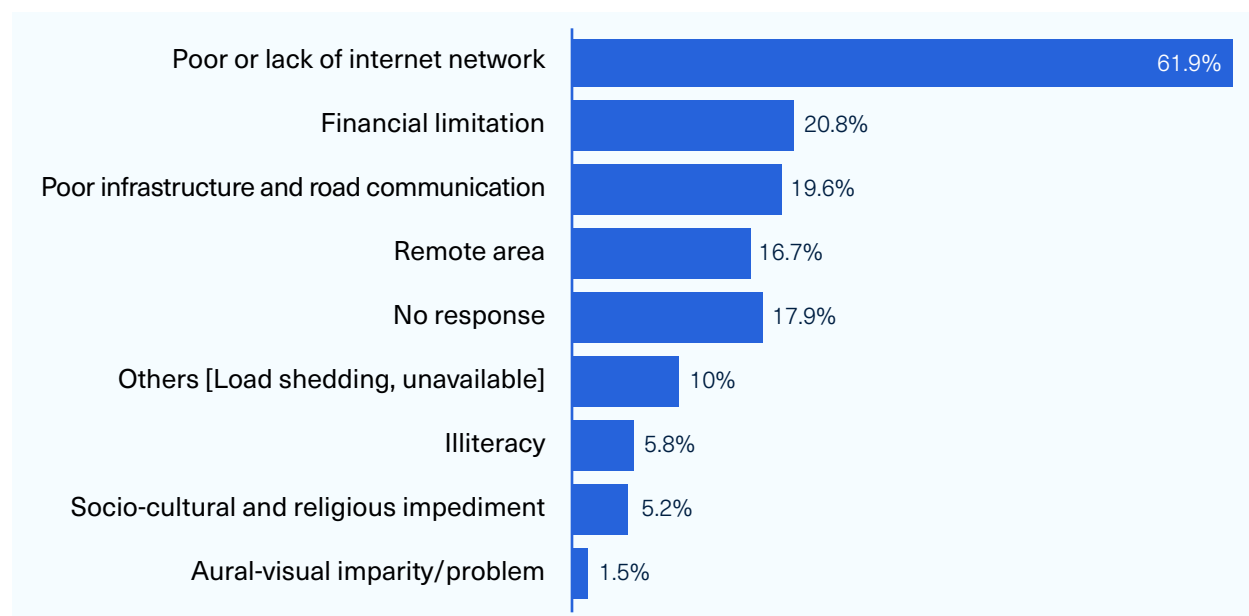
With approximately one-fourth of the population being illiterate, newspapers hold little relevance for them. Newspapers serve 8% of the audience, while the radio caters to only 0.3% as their main news sources. Studies and observations suggest that both male and female viewers opt for TV news and programs, while middle-aged literate audiences primarily rely on newspapers. Radio, being a traditional medium, is experiencing a decline in listenership daily, largely due to the popularity of television channels and the emergence of social and digital media platforms. As shown in (Annex 2: Table 13), IEA survey finds daily newspapers and radio received 37 (8%) and 8 responses ($\leq 2\%$) respectively, while daily news magazines receive the least attention among daily users, with only five responses (1%). However, as shown in (Annex 2: Table 13.b.) in remote and hilly area like Mymensingh, where satellite channels are less accessible to many due to limited television and cable network availability, the newspapers are more preferred as 36% read the same. One male KII noted in Chattogram hill tract region, “One who has no internet access but [is literate] still tries to get printed newspapers if available especially in the hilly areas.”

Another factor influencing access to media and information are community mobility and societal acceptance. KIIs conducted with gender-diverse populations revealed that transgender individuals face difficulties in accessing information due to societal stigma and discrimination. However, the study found that interpersonal and group interactions are effective channels for information exchange within this community. FGD findings from marginalized communities, including religious and occupational minorities, also indicated challenges in accessing information. Women and the PWDs are especially lagging in terms of using daily newspapers, online news portals and the social media platforms. The PWDs are more dependent on interpersonal communication channels as almost 74% responses reveal their stance while this channel is preferred by 55.7% youth and 59.7% women (Annex 2: Table 13.a.). Additionally, IEA survey also finds that interpersonal communication is most popular in Barishal at 83%, compared to an average of 58% across other divisions (Annex 2: Table 13.b.). Mahmud (2008) states that the lifestyles of Barishal people are somewhat different due to their river-based communication. Naturally, the people in this region prefer communal activities, like fairs and boatrace. One of the KIIs, a male teacher from the Department of Journalism at Barishal University, expressed that these factors, along with their local hospitality and communal approach to responding to natural disasters, contribute to fostering an environment reliant on interpersonal communication.

2.4 Barriers to Accessing Media

In Bangladesh, people encounter pragmatic barriers that hinder their access to various forms of media. These barriers limit audience exposure and can encompass diverse aspects. The IEA survey reveals that most respondents face barriers to watching television, accessing social media content and online news portals. When it comes to barriers to media access, the survey found that 62% of respondents cited poor or lack of internet network as a major obstacle. Financial insolvency was mentioned by 21% of respondents, while 20% faced challenges related to poor infrastructure and road communication, and more than 16% of respondents attributed their difficulties to the remoteness of their locality (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of multiple responses on the types of barriers to access to the media



2.5 Barriers to information during COVID-19

During COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, Bangladesh faced significant challenges in the coverage and dissemination of information. The country ranked fifth globally in terms of COVID-19-related deaths among journalists, as reported by the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC 2020). By November 2020, over a thousand journalists in Bangladesh were infected with COVID-19, and 37 had tragically passed away (Anik, Dhaka Tribune, November 9th, 2020).³⁶ As a result of the pandemic, people increasingly relied on television and online news portals for information and entertainment, leading to a decline in demand for printed newspapers. However, as the reliance on internet-based communication platforms increased, people faced difficulties

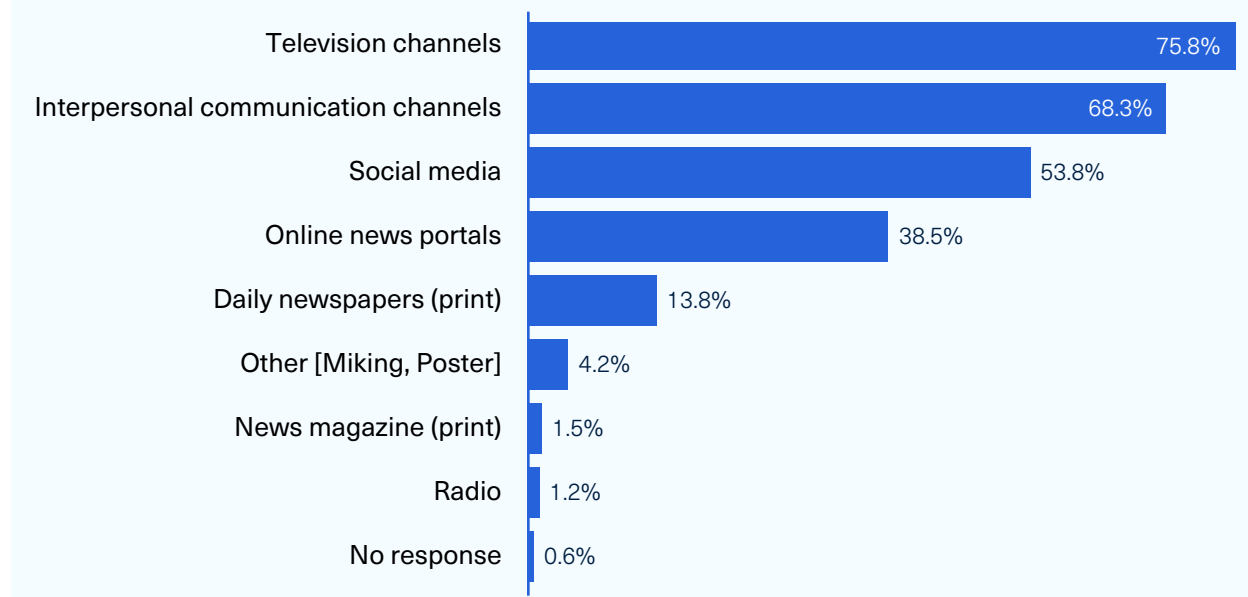
obtaining information due to network congestion. Women in Bangladesh, as identified by KII and FGD respondents, have limited opportunities to seek information independently due to their traditional household responsibilities. Instead, they heavily rely on family members, such as fathers, husbands, brothers, and relatives, for information, particularly on matters related to elections and politics. KII also highlighted that PWDs face challenges in media literacy and require specific techniques to access media content. Depending on the type of disability, for instance, individuals with blurred vision or blindness rely on audio formats as they cannot read newspapers.

2.6 Preferred Communication Channels/ Media on Elections and Politics

Community use of media to get information on election and politics

When it comes to obtaining political and election-related information, television emerged as the primary source for over 75% of respondents, followed by interpersonal communication channels, which is the most trusted source and 68% rely on. Social media platforms have gained popularity, with about 54% of respondents using them. In contrast, more than 38% of respondents turn to online news portals, while approximately 14% still rely on printed daily newspapers (Figure 5). These findings closely align with recent studies conducted by MRDI,³⁷ emphasizing the evolving media landscape and the increasing influence of television, social media, and online platforms in providing information on politics and elections.

Figure 5. Percentage distribution of multiple responses on the use of media/channels to get information on politics and election

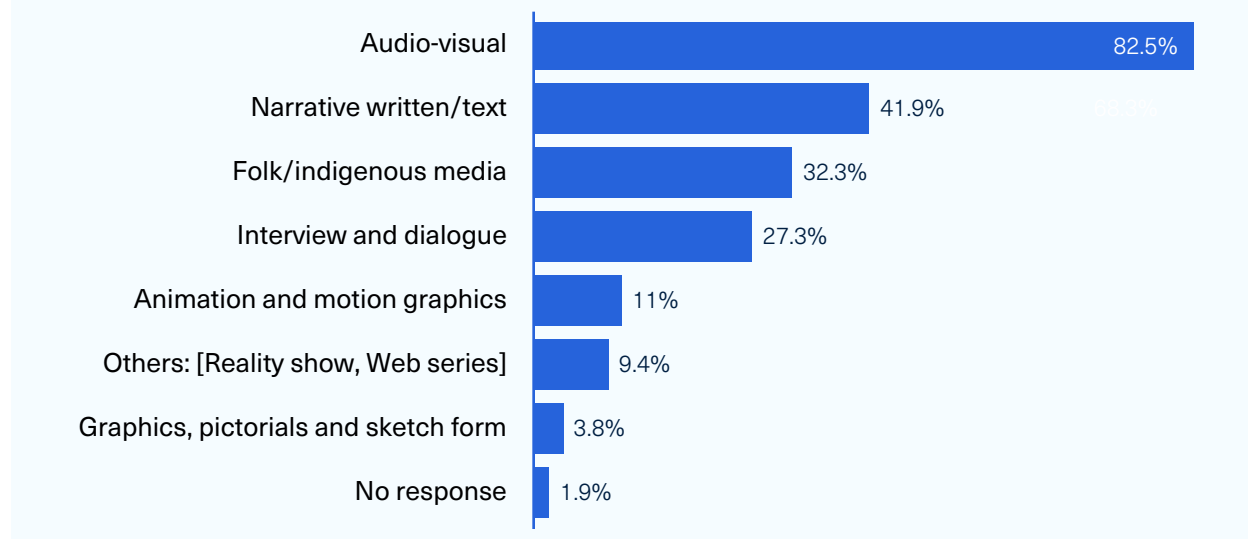


When it comes to interpersonal communication, 77% of respondents trust family members, friends, and relatives as the most reliable sources for political and electoral news. Community opinion leaders were mentioned by 67% of respondents, followed by elected representatives, government authorities, and civil society organizations (Annex 2: Table 5).

2.7 Community's Preferred Formats of Media Content

Most respondents, 82.5%, expressed a preference for audio-visual content such as short films, dramas, and documentaries. KIs of local journalists confirmed that people found audio-visual content easily understandable and entertaining. Additionally, 42% of respondents favored narrative written formats like reports, articles, and editorials. The data also revealed that 27% of respondents preferred interview and dialogue-based content, indicating a growing interest in conversational media formats like debate, dialogue, and podcasts etc. featuring insights from experts. Additionally, 11% favored visual content, suggesting that visuals alone may not fully engage audiences. These findings reflect changing audience preferences, with audio-visual formats being popular. However, written content, interview/dialogue-based content, and cultural/traditional media content continue to hold value in the industry (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Percentage distribution of multiple responses on preferred formats of media contents



In addition to traditional and new media, 32% of respondents were drawn to folk/indigenous media content, such as stage dramas, folk songs, and group performances. Bangladesh possesses a rich cultural heritage of folk and indigenous media, which continues to play a significant role in rural entertainment. Folk media forms like *jaree gann*, *sari gann*, *kobir*

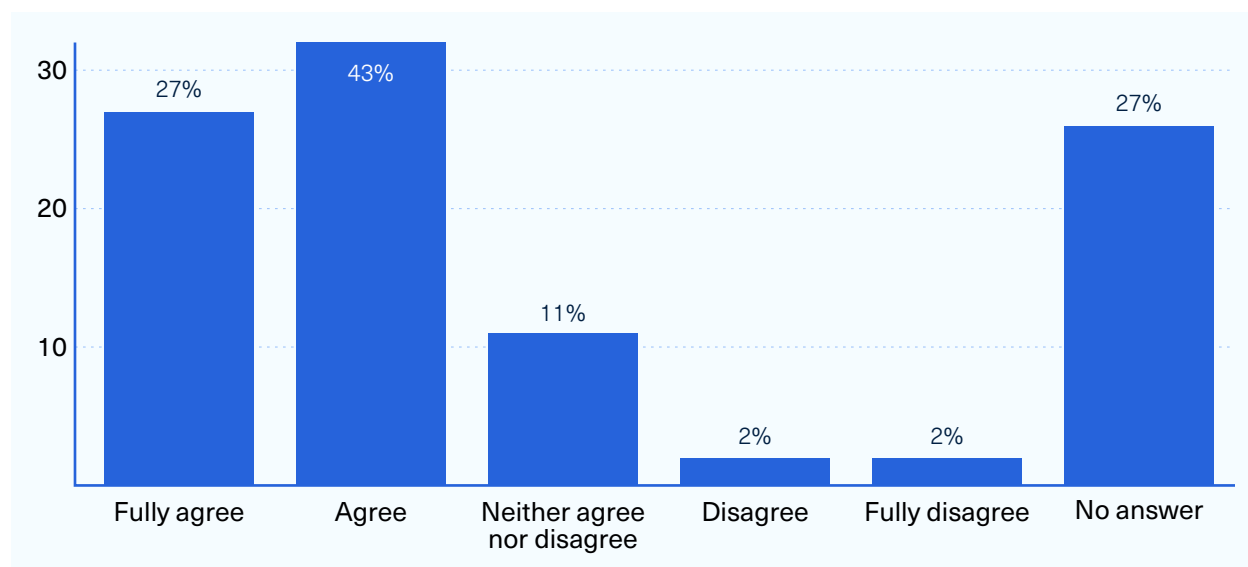
lorai, puppet shows, and street and stage dramas like *ganbhira*, *vatali*, and *gazir geet* enjoy popularity in various regions. Despite facing competition from television, social media, and digital platforms, some folk media, like Gambhira, a regional performing song from Rajshahi, still resonate with the people nationwide. A trend observed is the dissemination of folk media content through television, social media, and digital platforms, employing a “media mix” and “media integration approach” to distribute information in an “infotainment” format.

2.8 Perceptions on Media’s Role in Election, Accuracy and Impartiality

2.8.a The Media’s Role in Elections

Media’s significant role in raising awareness about civil rights and related issues has been widely acknowledged. According to the survey, 59% of respondents believe that fair coverage of political news aids in better understanding of their concerns and enables informed choices while selecting representatives. ‘Fair media coverage’ is described by FGD and KII respondents as accurate, balanced, and impartial presentation of political events, issues, and election affairs (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Percentage distribution of the responses on media’s fair coverage to help voters in selecting candidates



The role of media in influencing voter decisions is a topic of concern. According to the KII findings, media outlets often promote the image of their favored candidates, which raises questions about their neutrality. One of the male key informants, a civil society member in Chattogram hill tracts opine, “*No one speaks due to the regional political influence and the*

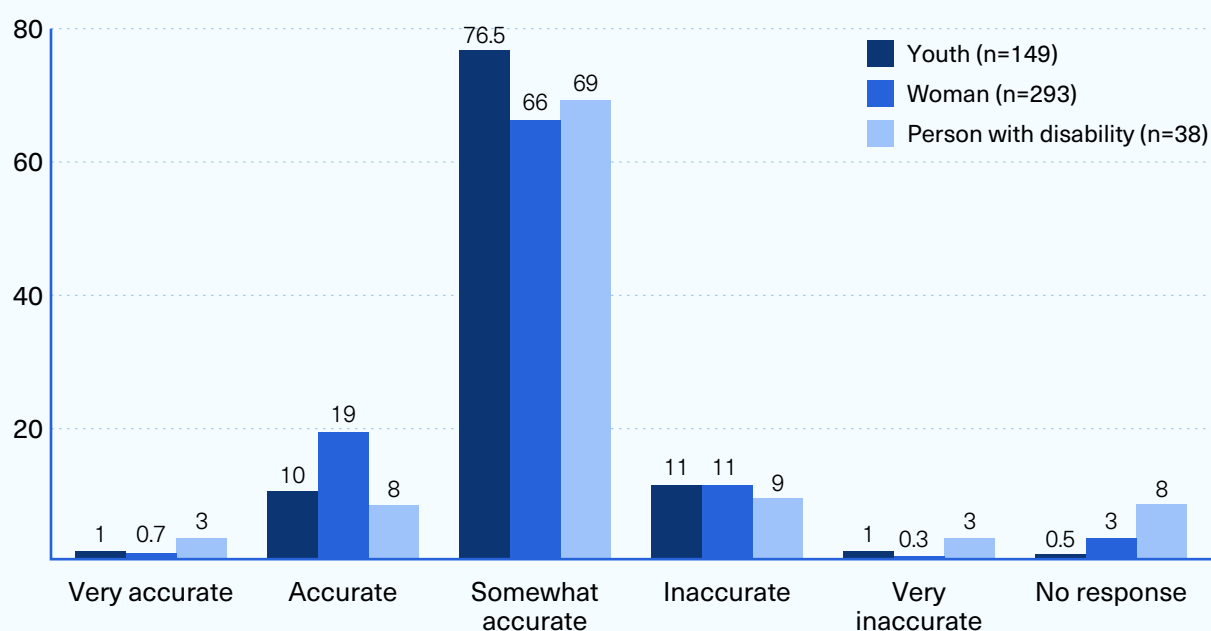
TV, radio and online news portals aren't useful...There blows a wind of voting for a particular candidate and the mass people follow and float on that stream of wind...Personal assessment plays more role than the media in taking decision to vote."

The IEA reveals significant gaps in media coverage of politics and election. One of the senior male journalist leaders in Dhaka said, *"Media don't adequately investigate the process and preparation of national election, role of the election commission, influence of the power elites in election, use of black money to influence the voters, role of the state authorizes and so on."*

2.8.b Overall Perceptions of Media Accuracy

Overall, 69% of respondents perceive the Bangladesh media as 'somewhat accurate,' while 15% consider it 'accurate' (Annex 2: Table 26). On par with the overall findings, youth (76.5%), women (66%), and PWDs (69%) all agreed that the media stories are 'somewhat accurate,' while only 1% of youth and women, and 3% of PWD considered news stories to be 'very accurate' (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Percentage distribution on perception of the media accuracy by the types of respondents

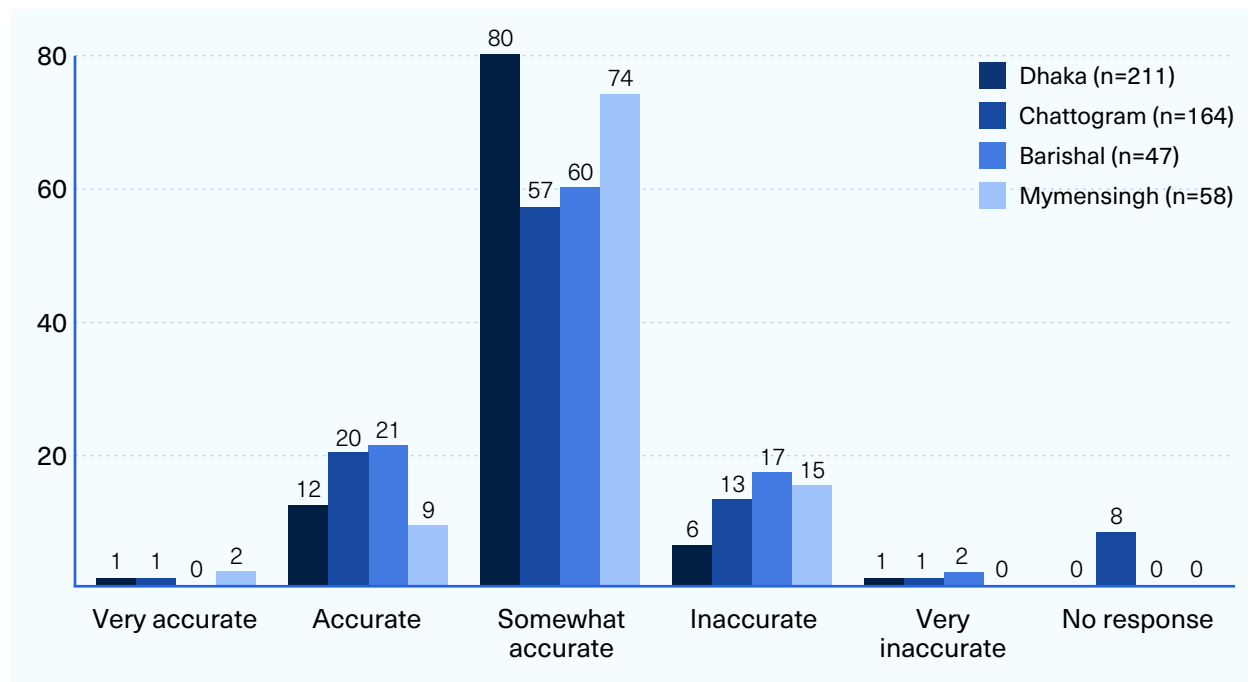


2.8.c Perceptions of Media by Division

When examining respondents by division, in Dhaka, about 80% considered the media to be 'somewhat accurate,' while in Chattogram and Barishal, 57% and 60% of respondents held the same perception, respectively. In Mymensingh, 74% reported a similar view of media accuracy.

Notably, respondents in Barishal were more critical, with 17% considering the media ‘inaccurate,’ compared to roughly 15%, 13%, and 6% of respondents in Mymensingh, Chattogram, and Dhaka, respectively (Figure 9). These findings suggest that media outlets outside of Dhaka and Chattogram are perceived as more inaccurate. It is worth noting that Dhaka and Chattogram, being the two largest cities, house most mainstream daily newspapers, local newspapers, TV stations, and online portals, which are developed to a higher professional standard compared to those in the outskirts.

Figure 9. Percentage distribution on division wise perception of the respondents on the accuracy of news media



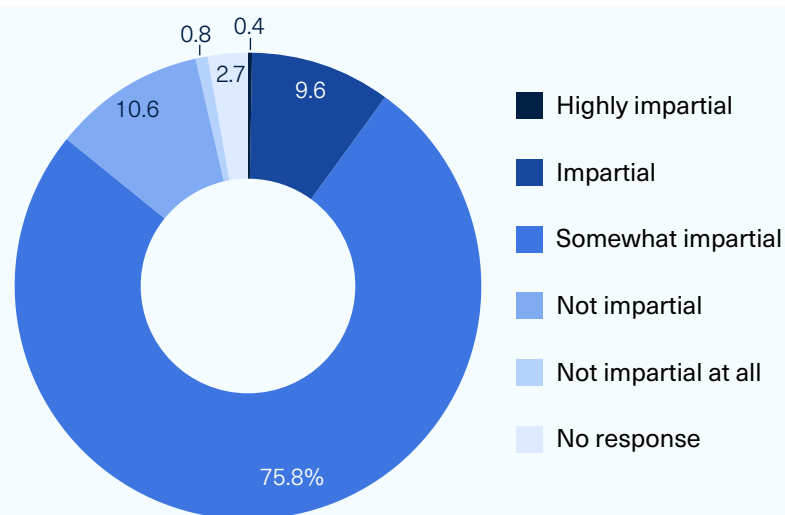
The FGD and KII findings highlight the significance of professional journalistic practice for media accuracy, emphasizing factors such as skilled journalists, proper news coverage, and a conducive working environment. One of the male key informants, who is a government official in Dhaka expressed: *“Inaccurate reports, especially on the election, are the products of some untrained journalists who even can’t interview an election commissioner properly due to the dearth of knowledge on election-related rules, laws, and regulations, the role of the election commission and other administrative organs during the election.”*

Interestingly, unlike other professions that require specialized knowledge and formal clearance, the KII findings in Dhaka indicate that the media in Bangladesh lacks a policy to exclusively recruit journalists with academic backgrounds in media, communication, and journalism which causes fundamental gaps in understanding of journalistic ethics, principles, style, and structures.

2.8.d Media Impartiality

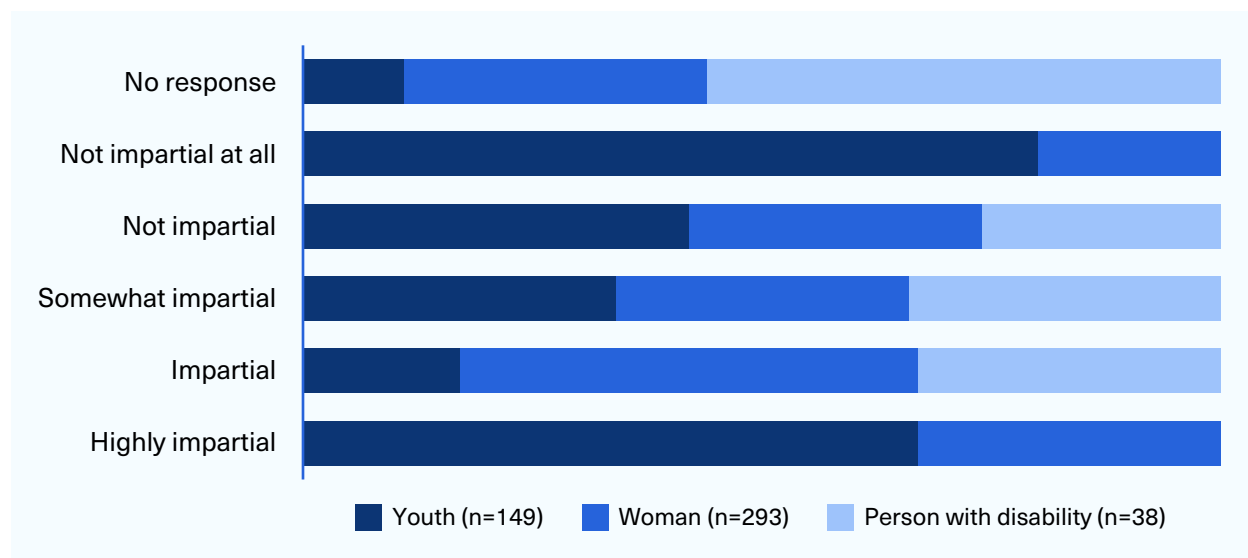
According to the findings from KIIs and FGDs, the media mostly demonstrate impartiality when covering non-political events and issues. When it comes to political and electoral news, bias becomes evident, as KII respondents acknowledge that media coverage during elections tends to favor preferred candidates, while media sponsorship hinders impartiality.

Figure 10. Respondent's perception of media impartiality



A senior male journalist in Chattogram laments, *“Impartial journalism is not possible due to media ownership. Journalists, despite their intentions, are unable to expose corporate malpractices. Media lack the freedom to exercise self-censorship and often present only one side of the story.”* Another KII revealed, *“Media in Bangladesh prioritize protecting the corporate interests of specific individuals.”*

Figure 11. Percentage distribution on perception of news media's impartiality by types of respondents

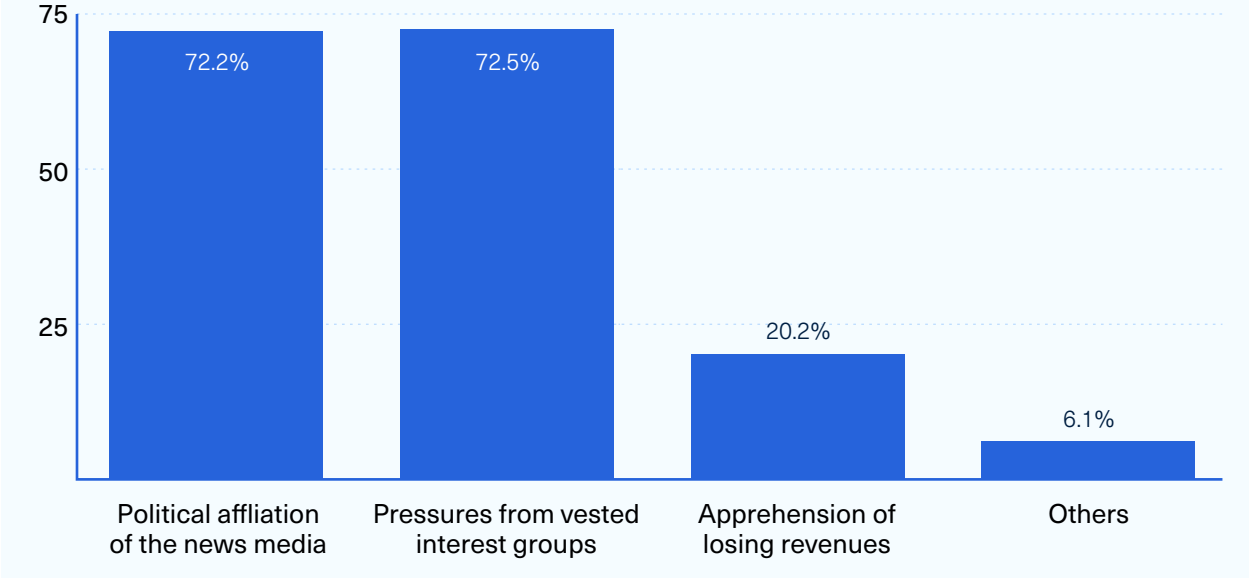


This is further reflected in the IEA survey. In terms of presenting the political and electoral news reports, 76% of respondents, perceived the Bangladesh media as *‘somewhat impartial’* while 10% viewed as *‘impartial,’* and 11% as *‘not impartial’* (Figure 10). This aggregation was

reflected by youth, women and PWD, with youth leaning more towards slightly impartial at 13% and women seeing the news as more impartial (Figure 10 & 11).

The lack of impartiality is also manifested in the coverage of political leaders or electoral candidates. In line with the findings on respondent’s perception of media impartiality, IEA survey finds, 68% of respondents believe that news media in Bangladesh do not provide equal coverage to political leaders or electoral candidates. Only 11% feel that the coverage is unbiased, while 21% are unsure or don’t have an opinion on the matter (Annex 2, table 23). The reasons behind this disparity in news media coverage of political candidates vary. Respondents cited both pressures from vested interest groups and the political affiliation of the news media as the primary factors, each receiving over 72% of responses. Additionally, concerns about losing revenues were mentioned by over 20% of respondents, while other reasons were mentioned by more than six% of respondents. (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on the reasons of perception of media’s unequal coverage



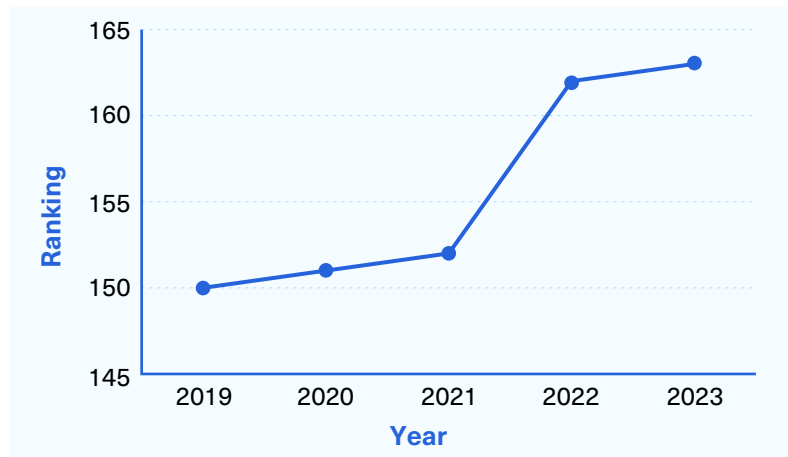
2.8.e Media Challenges

The Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index, shows that Bangladesh’s position is declining in terms of press freedom, dropping from a ranking of 150th in 2019 (out of 180 countries) to 163rd in 2023.³⁸ (Figure 13).

Media freedom in Bangladesh has greatly diminished due to repressive government laws and policies, eroding democratic governance following a prolonged one-party rule. Technological shifts, the growth of social and digital media and increased corporate ownership have also

restricted the news media sector. Journalists and media professional's field face numerous professional risks, including oppressive media laws, bureaucratic dominance, and vindictive behavior from law enforcement agencies, power elites, and vested interest groups. Various factors, including journalist harassment, attacks, lawsuits, the draconian DSA,

Figure 13. Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index



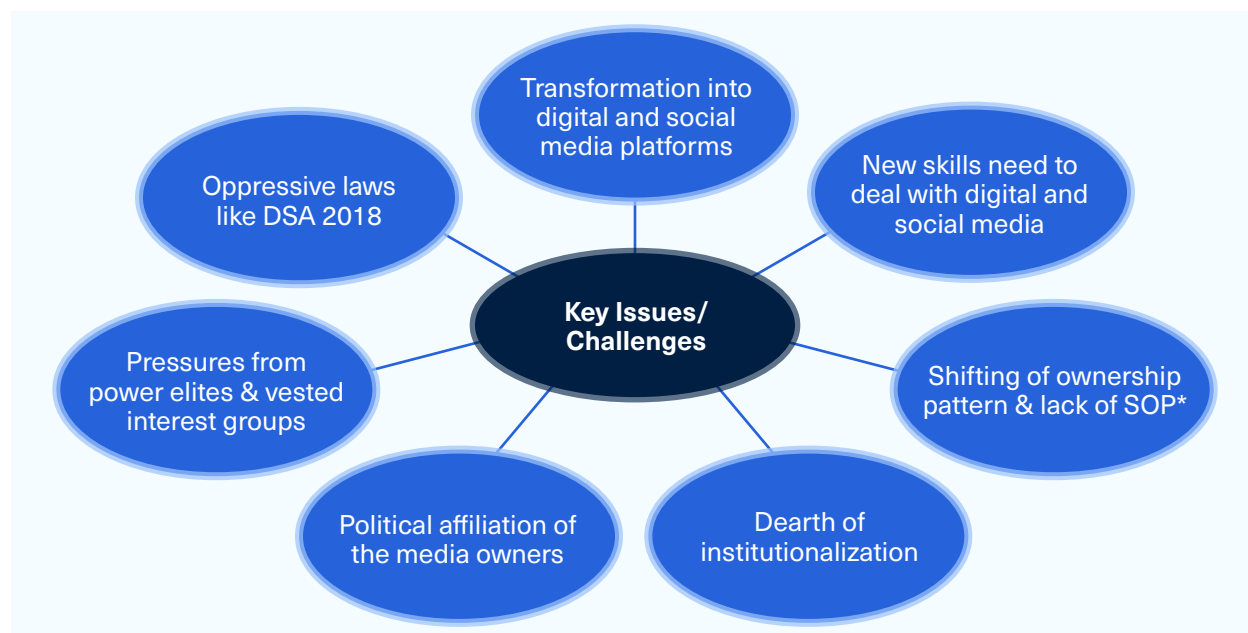
pressure from media owners, corporate houses, and ad providers, as well as vested interest groups and self-censorship, are impeding press freedom and freedom of expression. According to a report³⁹ of the Daily Star based on the information of Article under the DSA, 457 individuals were arrested and prosecuted in 198 cases, with 75 of them being journalists. Recently, a female investigative reporter faced harassment and arrest, invoking the Official Secrets Act 1923, which sparked protests domestically and internationally.⁴⁰ Colonial-era laws like the 'Code of Criminal Procedure 1898' and 'Penal Code 1860' continue to exist, curbing the freedom of expression and limiting the voice of the free media in violation of constitutional rights. RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said in a statement "Journalism is the best vaccine against disinformation. Unfortunately, its production and distribution are too often blocked by political, economic, technological and, sometimes, even cultural factors."⁴¹

State-owned media outlets funded by the public often prioritize serving the ruling party and the government's interests instead of representing the public. Although Bangladesh's constitution guarantees freedom of expression, it also imposes "reasonable restrictions" that are subjectively exploited by various state departments, including the ruling party, lawmakers, and law enforcement agencies. Media regulatory laws and policies take advantage of these restrictions, limiting freedom of expression. Law enforcement authorities occasionally disregard the broader objectives of the laws and policies, aiming to control press freedom and the people's right to know and express themselves.

"If any political news goes against anybody, they become outraged and intend to revenge from the grievances. In case of any report against the ruling party leaders, we have to face attack and lawsuits."

— Senior male journalist KII in Barishal

Figure 14. Key Challenges of BD Media At a Glance.



2.9 Information Supply and Demand/Need

The survey reveals significant information gaps regarding available information on special measures for women, people with disabilities, and those with special needs, with only 6% currently receiving such information, while 40% express the desire to receive it. The FGD findings indicate that significant gaps exist between the information received by respondents and their preferences for information regarding political parties, the voting process, the election environment, candidate qualifications and commitments, law and order, and election commission preparations (Figure 15). Information about candidates primarily comes from their supporters and the candidates themselves, disseminated through posters, leaflets, and social media posts that often portray their activities in a positive light.

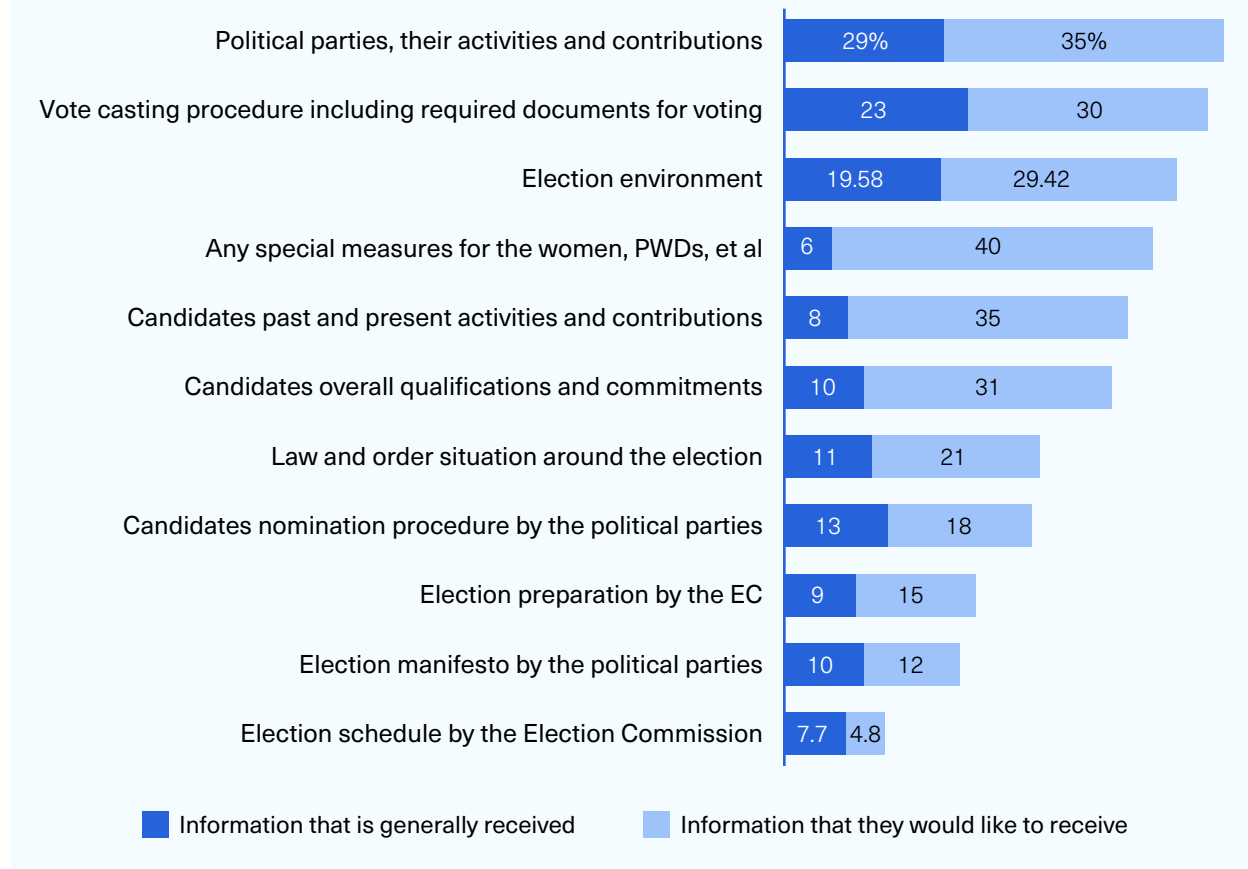
"Most of the time, I rely on posters and leaflets for candidate information, although they may not always be reliable."

— Youth FGD participant from Chattogram

The electoral environment lacks information, particularly for women and PWDs. KII and FGD findings emphasized the importance of communicating information about the voting system, safety measures, and the overall election atmosphere to voters. Especially the recent piloting of electronic voting machines (EVMs), which has generated inquiries from all segments of

society, as the public is not accustomed to voting via EVMs. A marginalized participant from Chattogram expressed the need for training and demonstrations on EVMs, stating, “We lack a clear concept about the electronic voting process.”

Figure 15. A percentage comparison between the information that the respondents receive and intend to receive



The respondents’ information needs also reflect concerns within the communities regarding safety and security, particularly for women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. The issue of safety and security is emphasized by 89% of people with disabilities, 62% of women, and 59% of young individuals. Both people with disabilities and youth express equal interest in obtaining knowledge about the voting procedure (Figure 16).

Safety and security are the top priority for women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities in Dakah, Barisal and, Mymensingh with an average of 73%, though it is much lower in Chattogram at 38%. Information needs on punishment for rule violations with an average of 32% and led by Barisal at 49%. In Barisal, citizens also expect more information about elections rule and regulations and candidates’ qualifications. While in Mymensingh, 64% of respondents prioritize information about the candidates. (Figure 17).

Figure 16. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on community information needs

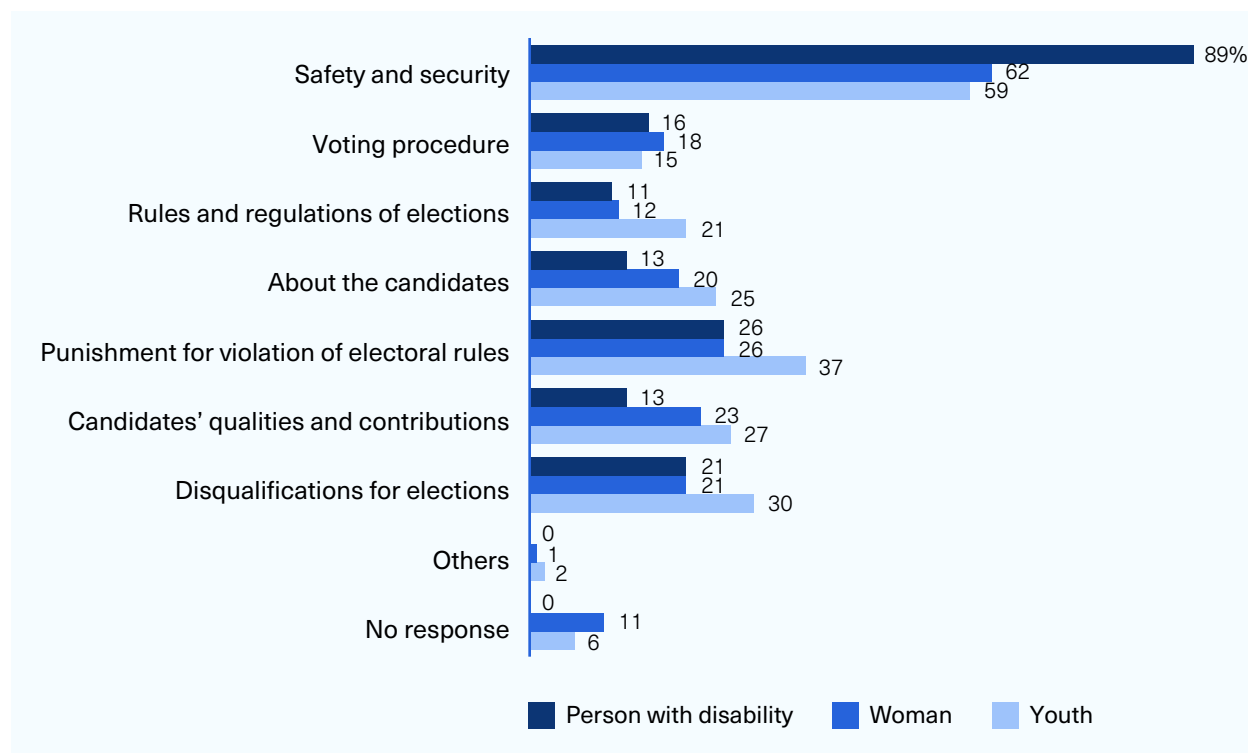
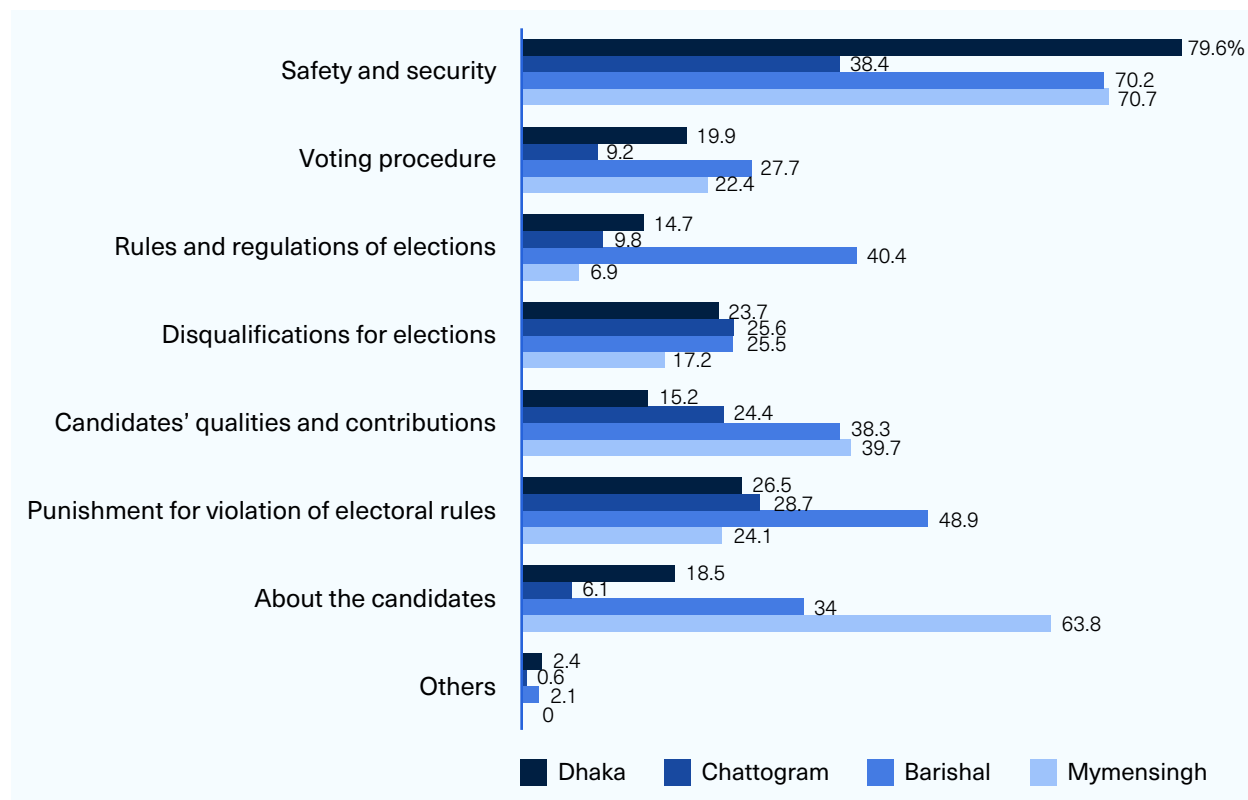


Figure 17. Division-wise distribution of percentages of multiple responses on information needs



[Note: * Others: Minorities security, Development activities to be done, regarding candidate family, regarding candidate assets].

2.10 Community Trust in Media

The FGD and KII findings shed light on different interpretations of 'trust' in media. Some respondents view trust as honest coverage of events without distortion, while others believe media should provide fair information regardless of personal biases. The questionnaire survey indicates that despite occasional inaccuracies and partiality; the community still maintains varying levels of trust in the media. To identify trusted media sources, respondents were asked, "What news media/channels do you trust for political and electoral news?" with multiple response options.⁴²

According to respondents, television was the most preferred media source, with over 76% of the responses. The findings suggest some names of the popular channels like the Somoy TV, Jamuna television, Channel24, Independent television, News24, RTV, Ekushey TV, Banglavisión. Facebook emerged as the most trusted social media platform, with over 40% of the responses, followed by YouTube with 37%. Online news portals gained trust from around 29% of the respondents, while daily newspapers and print media were trusted by approximately 19% and 18% respectively. Imo and visual media, including banners, festoons, sideboards, and transit ads, each gained the trust of over 13% of respondents, while government websites gained around 10% of trust. TikTok and WhatsApp, as individual social media platforms, gained the trust of over 70% of respondents. News magazines (print), Twitter, Instagram, and Radio at approximately 2%. The findings from FGD and KII reveal that the credible news portals are bdnews24.com, banglanews24.com, dhakapost, rising bd.com, dhakamail.com, jagonews24.com (Figure 18).

Television is highly trusted for its ability to provide audio-visual coverage of events or incidents, with FGD participants emphasizing its reliability in capturing live events and allowing viewers to witness what is happening firsthand. Newspapers, on the other hand, earn trust due to their longstanding presence as a traditional news medium with extensive journalism experience. Social media is trusted because the content is produced and shared by familiar individuals.

Figure 19 presents trust levels among social media platforms. Facebook enjoys the highest trust among 37% of users, while YouTube is mostly trusted by 31% of viewers. WhatsApp is most trusted by 19% of users while news apps/websites are most trusted by 30% of users. Trust levels for other social media platforms i.e., Imo, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram were not extensively examined due to limited user data.

Figure 18. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on trusted media in getting political and electoral news

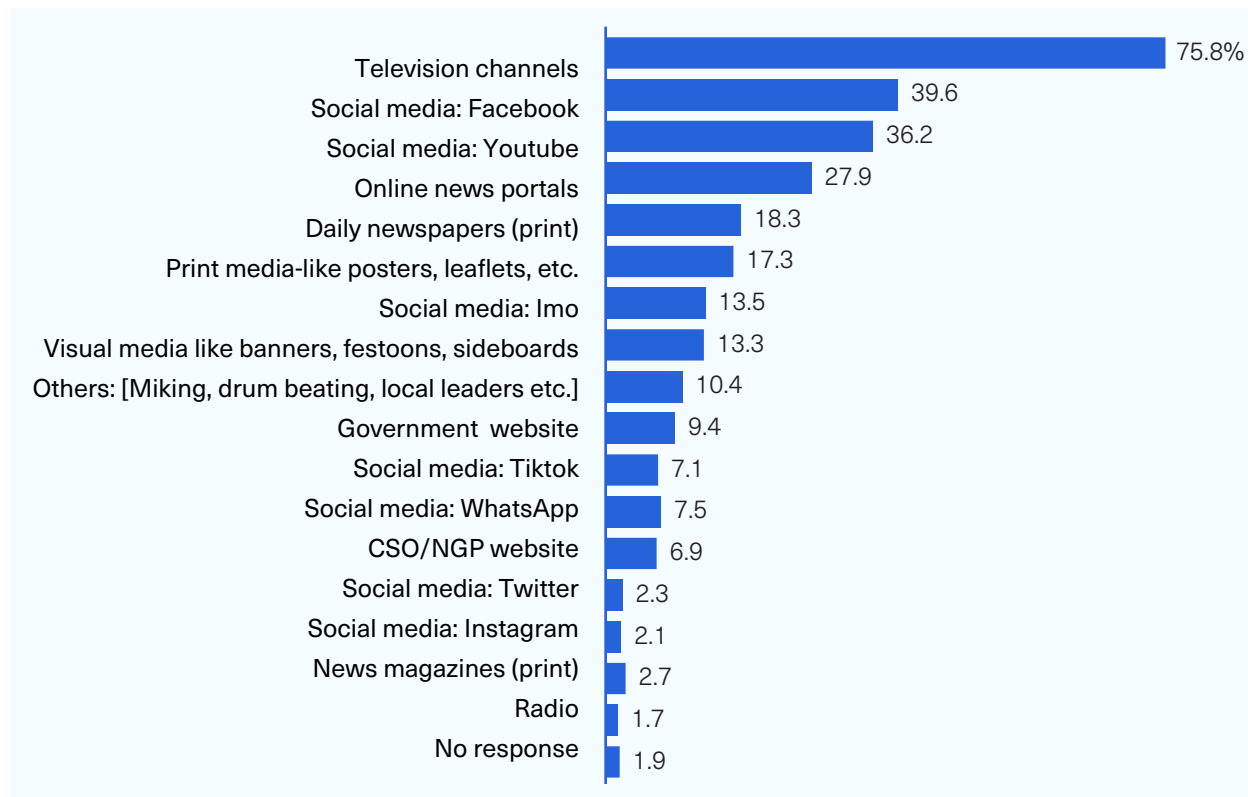
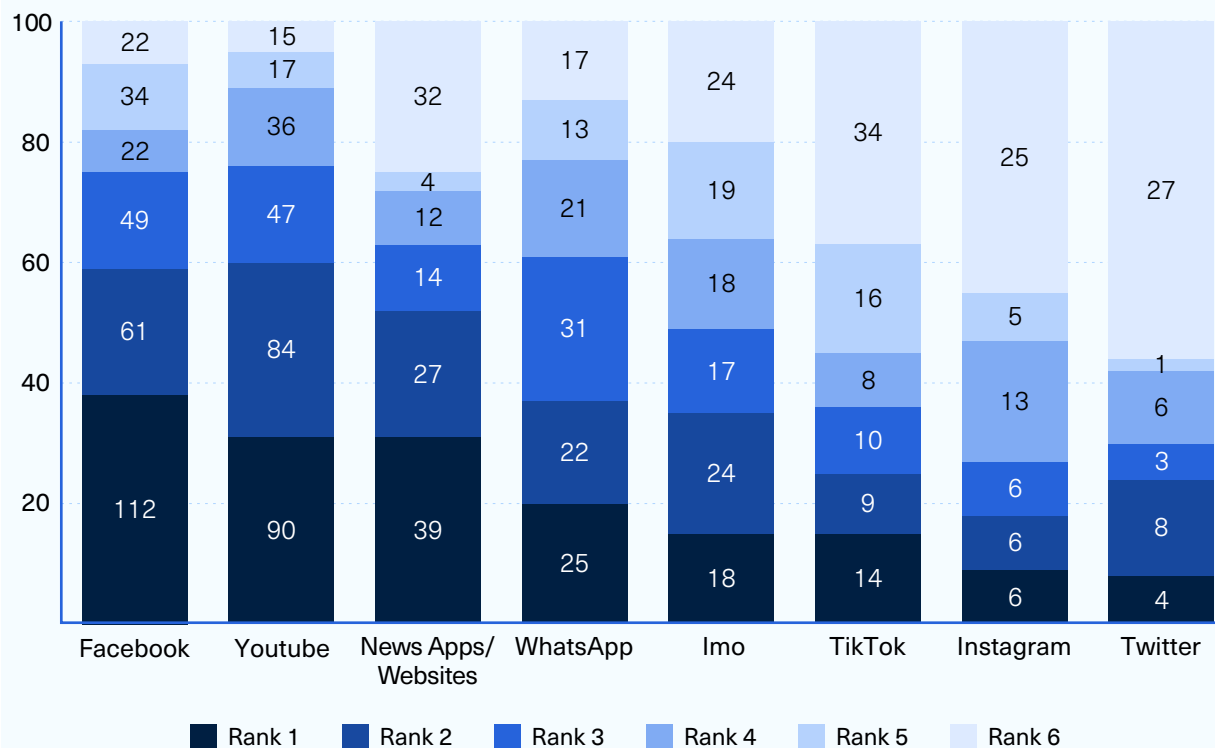


Figure 19. Frequency distribution of responses on trusted online/social media platforms (Rank 1=most trusted, 6 least trusted)



However, FGDs with women and marginalized groups reveal that many of them face barriers in using Facebook, such as lack of time, smartphones, and digital skills. Consequently, they rely on youth family members, relatives, and community members to access Facebook content, leading to challenges in distinguishing between credible and non-credible information on social media. Additionally, the FGD and KII respondents felt Facebook is being widely misused because many users lack media literacy, preventing them from using social media in a responsible and effective manner. One of the FGD respondents (journalists' group) in Dhaka said, *"A lot can be understood by one's own thoughts in social media. While one of the male KIIs opine that the impact of the social media in Bangladesh is worst."* He says, *"it is not a media at all. There is mushroom growth of YouTube channels even in the rural areas that make news without verification of information for which our country as well as society are being affected badly."*

Findings from the FGDs and KIIs support the notion that Bangladesh news media exhibit bias in their reports on politics and elections. Participants mentioned media's partisanship towards affiliated political parties and ideologies due to media owners having their own political identity. Journalists in Mymensingh highlighted the influence of local political leaders, who treat journalists as their own followers.

A study conducted by Riaz & Rahman (2021)⁴³ sheds light on the ownership patterns of TV channels in Bangladesh. The study reveals that during different regimes of the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League, 40 TV channels received approval, while five channels obtained approval during the tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Notably, both the Dhaka Tribune and the Bangla Tribune are owned by 2A Media Limited, a business concern of Gemcon Group, which has ties to the Awami League through its vice-chairman, Kazi Nabil Ahmed, who is also an Awami League lawmaker.

The study further reveals that Mohona TV and Duronto TV are owned by ruling party MP Kamal Ahmed Majumdar and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, respectively. Interestingly, changes in ownership have occurred, with individuals associated with the ruling party acquiring shares in Mohona TV. Similarly, Duronto TV is operated by Barind Media Limited, a subsidiary of Renaissance Group owned by Shahriar Alam.⁴⁴

The findings indicate a trend where licenses are often granted to individuals aligned with the ruling party, and existing channels' ownership tends to change hands to individuals considered safe or affiliated with the ruling party. For instance, the study highlights the case of Ten TV, which was later acquired and renamed NTV by a close confidant of former Prime Minister

Khaleda Zia from the opposing BNP party. Additionally, Desh TV, initially awarded to BNP leader Mushfiqur Rahman MP, saw most of its shares being purchased by Awami League MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury.⁴⁵ These ownership dynamics raise questions about media plurality, credibility and independence in the country.

The FGD findings highlight the presence of political leaders operating online news portals and digital platforms run by their supporters, aiming to disseminate one-sided news to a wide audience. Concerns about impartiality in the media industry were expressed by FGD participants, with one participant in Chattogram stating, *“Where there is money, there is media,”* suggesting that media in Bangladesh is influenced by funders’ agendas. Another participant noted that state-run media aligns with the ruling party’s agenda, while corporate-run media prioritizes business interests, indicating they are not truly mass media.

During an FGD with marginalized individuals in Dhaka, one participant expressed, *“We do not receive reliable political and electoral news from the news media; we form our own judgments.”* Another participant added, *“Television channels are more trusted than Facebook since the Facebook sometimes spreads fake news. Some news channels strive for live coverage and accuracy.”* In a noteworthy statement, a female FGD participant in Dhaka remarked, *“Information from Facebook/YouTube isn’t always correct, but the opinions of community leaders are consistently accurate. Hence, we place our trust in the voices of our community.”*

The KIs reveal that mainstream news media strive for neutrality in event-based news coverage but struggle to maintain it in political news due to the political affiliations of media owners and journalists. Across all four divisions, the KIs highlighted strong control over political and electoral news by the ruling party and administration, preventing coverage of information contrary to their vested interests or malpractices such as illegal business and corruption.

The malpractices surrounding elections are evident from the statements of FGD participants. A youth participant in Chattogram expressed disinterest in political activities, saying, *“I am not interested in political activities due to the current situation. I tried to vote twice, but someone else cast my vote both times.”* Another participant shared their experience, stating, *“I was on my way to vote, but I learned about a clash between two groups near the polling center, so I returned without casting my vote.”*

Currently, two major political parties in Bangladesh, namely Bangladesh Awami League and BNP, directly own or have affiliations with media outlets. Additionally, Jatiya Party (Manju), another significant political party, is affiliated with the country’s leading daily newspaper, ‘The

Daily Ittefaq,' where Manju served as editor and publisher from 1972 to 2007. Furthermore, 'Daily Naya Diganta,' a newspaper owned by Diganta Media Corporation and operated by a political leader from Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh, continues to be published, although 'Diganta Television' is no longer active.⁴⁶

Amidst the existing reality of media ownership, political affiliation, and overall impartiality in political coverage, the FGD with youths highlights moderately trustworthy news media sources. Jamuna TV, DBC news, Somoy TV, News 24, Independent Television, RTV, Channel 24, Prothom-Alo, Daily Star, and Bangladesh Pratidin are moderately recognized for maintaining their reputation for accuracy and impartiality. A participant from a CSO FGD in Dhaka expresses trust in 'Ekattor TV,' while villagers rely on the information provided by opinion leaders when selecting candidates.

2.11 State of Mis-/disinformation, Hate Speech and Media Literacy

2.11.a Community Awareness and Understanding of Misinformation

When asked about the definition of misinformation, only 36.5% of respondents correctly understood the issue, while 38% had an incorrect definition. More than 25% expressed uncertainty or lack of knowledge regarding the matter (Table 2).

Table 2. Respondent's understanding of misinformation

Answer	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Right understanding on misinformation	175	36.5%
Wrong understanding on misinformation	182	37.9%
Don't know/Not sure	122	25.4%
No response	1	.2%
Total	480	100.0%

2.11.b Subjects of Misinformation

The respondents held varying opinions on the spread of misinformation during elections, with a significant majority (72%) acknowledging its occurrence. Approximately 17% of respondents expressed uncertainty, while more than 10% outright denied the presence of misinformation. When asked about the subjects of false information, a substantial 86% of respondents reported

that they found misinformation that targeted the candidates. Around 42% of responses highlighted the election environment as a subject of false information, followed by election rules (15.6%) and the election commission itself (7%) (Table 3). According to the survey, the majority (74.6%) of responses attributed the spread of misinformation to the candidate's supporters. In contrast, 32% of responses pointed to the candidate's relatives as responsible. Notably, around 19% of responses identified the candidates themselves as responsible for these activities (Table 4).

Table 3. Subjects of misinformation

Subjects	Responses Number	Percent (n=544)	Percent of Cases (n=346)
Regarding candidate	299	55.0%	86.4%
Election environment	145	26.7%	41.9%
Election rules	54	9.9%	15.6%
Election commission	25	4.6%	7.2%
Law enforcing agencies	21	3.9%	6.1%
Total	544	100.0%	157.2%

Table 4. Who spread misinformation (multiple responses)?

Answer	Responses Number	Percent (n=511)	Percent of Cases (n=346)
Candidate's supporters	258	50.5%	74.6%
Candidate's relatives	112	21.9%	32.4%
Candidate	65	12.7%	18.8%
Others	76	14.9%	22.0%
Total	511	100.0%	147.7%

[Note: * Others: Third-party political members, vested interested groups]

2.II.c Awareness/understanding of Disinformation

In the survey, 58% of respondents correctly defined disinformation, while 17% provided incorrect definitions, and over 24% were unsure or unaware of the concept (Table 5). The findings also indicated that more than 72% of respondents were aware of disinformation, while 16% were unsure, and 11% reported no personal experience with disinformation.

Table 5. Respondent's understanding of disinformation

Answer	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Right understanding on disinformation	280	58.3%
Wrong understanding on disinformation	82	17.1%
Don't know/Not Sure	117	24.4%
No response	1	.2%
Total	480	100.0%

2.II.d Subjects of Disinformation

The survey revealed that 85% of disinformation was spread about candidates, while 46% of responses highlighted the election environment. Election rules were mentioned as a subject of disinformation by 13% of responses, and the election commission was mentioned by 7% of responses. Law enforcement agencies were mentioned in 4% of responses (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on subjects of disinformation around election

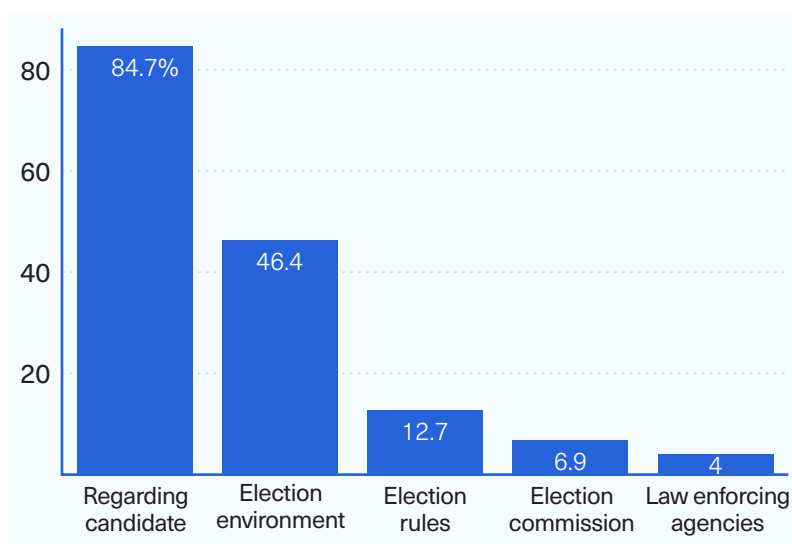


Table 6. Who spread disinformation (multiple answers)?

Answer	Responses Number	Percent (n=537)	Percent of Cases (n=347)
Candidate's supporters	267	49.7%	76.9%
Candidate's relatives	128	23.8%	36.9%
Candidates	71	13.2%	20.5%
Others	71	13.2%	20.5%
Total	537	100.0%	154.8%

[Note: * Others: Third-party political members, vested interested groups]

Regarding the spread of disinformation, the majority, 77%, believed that the candidate's supporters were responsible. However, 37% of responses implicated the candidate's relatives

as the masterminds behind the spread of disinformation. Interestingly, 20% attributed the dissemination to the candidates themselves, while another 20% blamed others, such as the supporters of the opposing candidate and vested interest groups (Table 6).

Table 7. Rating respondent's knowledge/understanding of mis-/disinformation

Answer	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Excellent	14	2.9%
Good	48	10.0%
Medium	275	57.3%
Poor	106	22.1%
Very Poor	35	7.3%
No response	2	0.4%
Total	480	100.0%

According to the IEA survey, the respondents' knowledge level of mis-/disinformation varies significantly. The majority, 57%, rate their knowledge as medium, while 22% consider it poor. Only 10% rate their understanding as good, with a mere 3% claiming an excellent level of knowledge. In contrast, 7% of respondents admit to having a very poor understanding (Table 7).

Table 8. Ability to identify mis-/disinformation

Answer	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Extremely confident	22	4.6%
Very confident	49	10.2%
Moderately Confident	272	56.7%
Slightly confident	97	20.2%
Not confident at all	37	7.7%
No response	3	.6%
Total	480	100.0%

When it comes to identifying mis-/disinformation, the majority, 57% of respondents express moderate confidence, while 20% are slightly confident. About 15% of respondents reported being extremely or very confident in identifying mis-/disinformation. Conversely, approximately 8% lack any confidence in their ability to identify disinformation (Table 8).

Table 9. Rating respondent's knowledge/understanding of mis-/disinformation by groups

Answer	Youth (n=148)		Woman (n=292)		Person with disability (n=38)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Excellent	5	3%	7	2%	2	5%
Good	21	14%	27	9%	0	0%
Medium	98	66%	153	52%	24	63%
Poor	20	14%	79	28%	7	19%
Very Poor	4	3%	26	9%	5	13%

Group-wise distribution of knowledge/understanding of mis-/disinformation, the trend of most responses indicated 'medium level of knowledge/understanding' possessed by the respondents. Of the youth respondents, 66% revealed they had medium level of knowledge while the present for the women was 52% and for the PWDs was 63%. However, all the three types of the respondents agreed that they had poor knowledge/understanding of the same. In terms of poor knowledge, the women group possessed the highest responses with 37% while the percentage for the PWDs was 32% in that category of responses (Table 9).

Table 10. Ability to identify mis-/disinformation by groups

Answer	Youth (n=147)		Woman (n=293)		Person with disability (n=37)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Extremely confident	8	5%	13	4%	1	3%
Very confident	23	16%	23	8%	3	8%
Moderately confident	94	64%	154	52%	24	65%
Not confident	20	14%	72	25%	5	13%
Not confident at all	2	1%	31	11%	4	11%

The survey reveals that all the three target groups have moderate confidence level (youth 64%, women 52% and PWDs 65%) to identify mis-/disinformation. It is also revealed that 14% youth are not confident to identify the same while the percentage for the women is 25% and PWDs is 13% (Table 10).

Regarding hate speech, 71% of respondents observed an increase in discriminatory, intolerant, bigoted, prejudiced, and demeaning language directed at individuals and groups during the election. However, approximately 14% of respondents did not notice such an increase, and 15% were unsure. (Annex 2, table 38). When it comes to hate speech, 95% of it is targeted towards opposing candidates, while around 10% of respondents mention religious minorities

and PWDs as subjects. Additionally, 5% of respondents mention gender-diverse individuals as targets of hate speech. (Figure 21).

In the survey, 83% of responses pointed to the candidate’s supporters spreading hate speech, while 31% indicated the candidate’s relatives engaging in such behavior. The candidates themselves were mentioned in 23% of responses, while 14% referred to individuals from opposing political parties, their supporters, and vested interest groups (Table 11).

Figure 21. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on subjects of hate speech

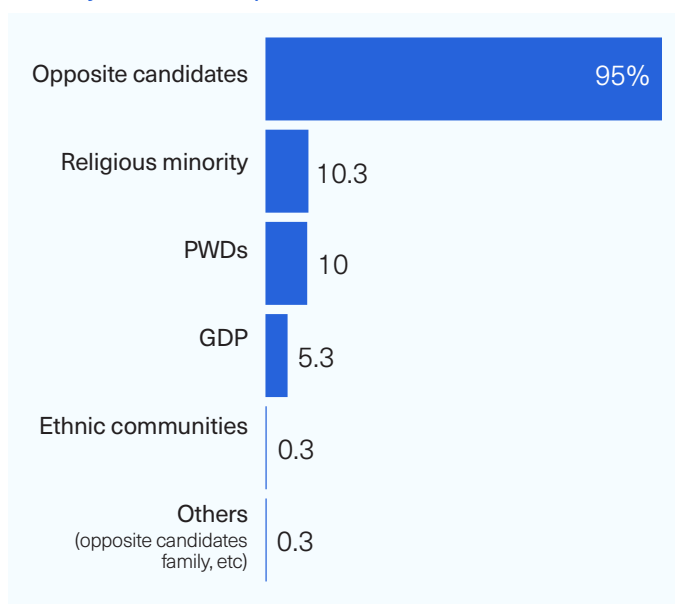


Table 11. Who spread hate (multiple responses) speech?

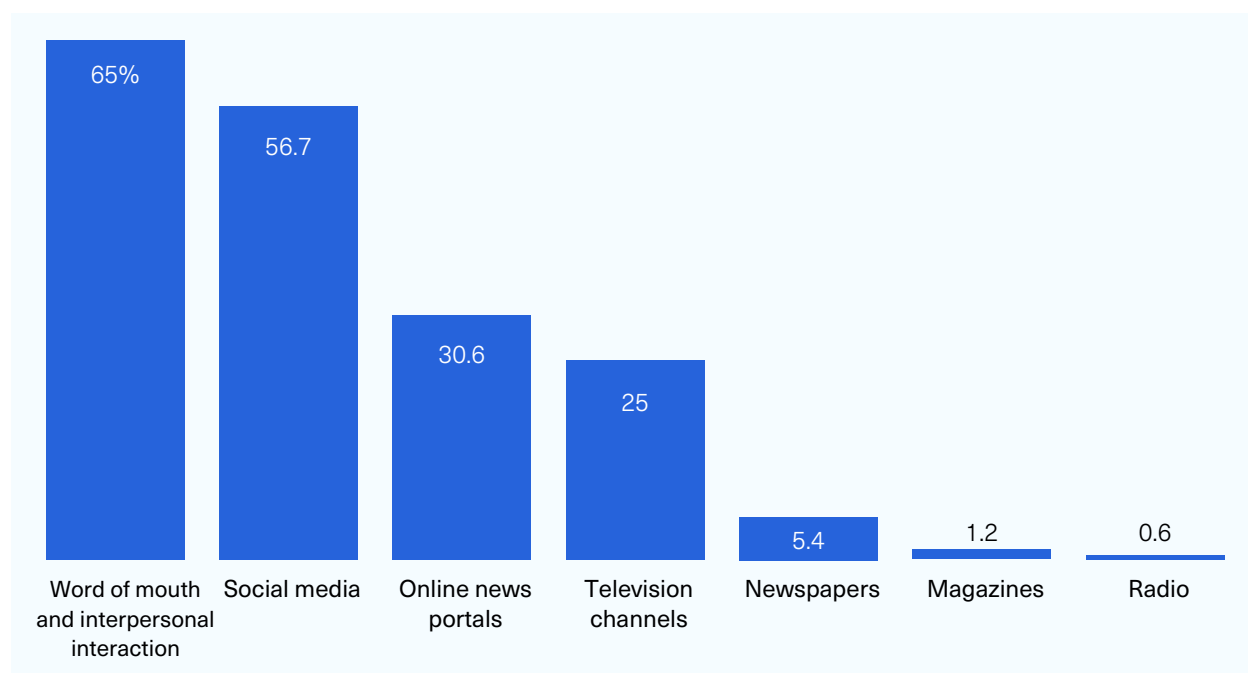
Answer	Responses Number	Percent (n=514)	Percent of Cases (n=340)
Candidate’s supporters	283	55.1%	83.2%
Candidate’s relatives	106	20.6%	31.2%
Candidate	77	15.0%	22.6%
Others	48	9.3%	14.1%
Total	514	100.0%	151.2%

[Note: * Others: Opposite political party men and supporter, vested interested group

2.II.e Media used to Spread Mis-/disinformation and Hate-speech

According to the findings, 65% of respondents identified word of mouth and interpersonal interactions as the primary means of spreading misinformation and disinformation. This emphasizes the significant role of personal recommendations and opinions of friends, family, and acquaintances play in disseminating rumors and false information. Social media emerged as the second most used source for spreading hate speech and misinformation, accounting for 57% of responses. Online news portals followed as the third most prevalent source, cited by 31% of respondents, while television channels ranked fourth at 25%. Newspapers and magazines were mentioned by a small percentage of participants, with only 5% using newspapers and 1% employing magazines to spread such information (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Percentage distribution of the multiple responses on media spreading mis-and disinformation



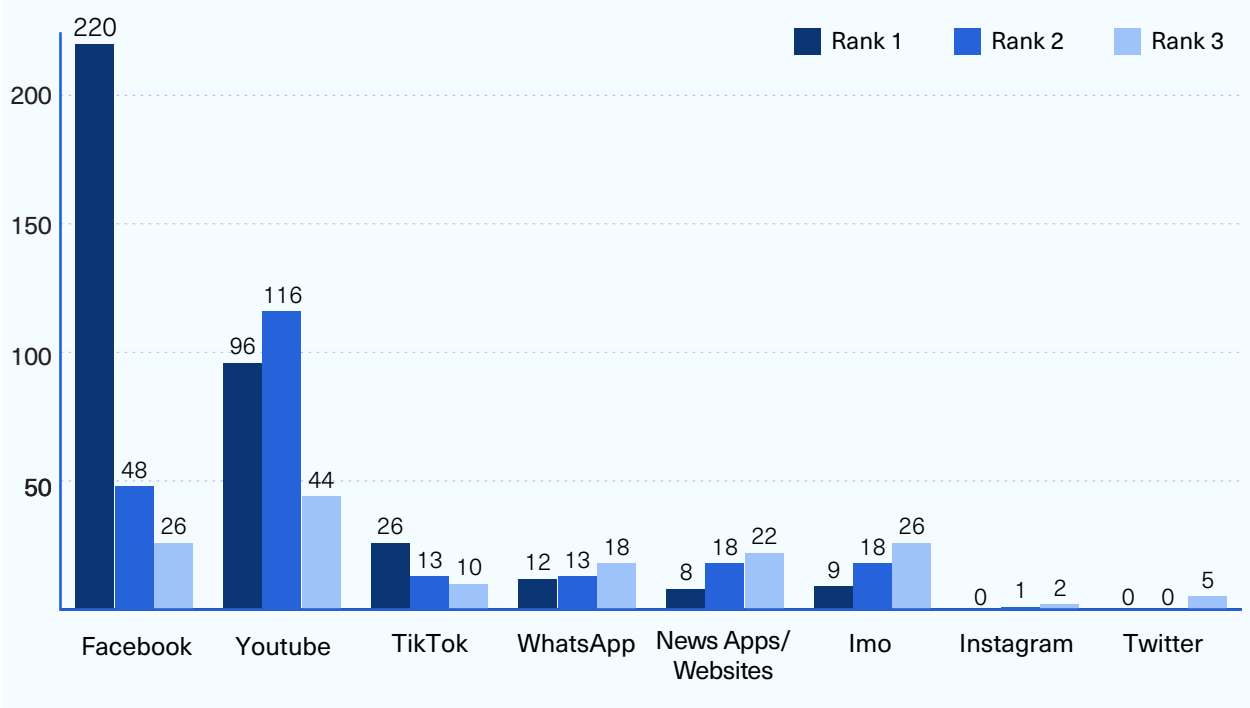
The FGD and KII findings indicate a concerning lack of media literacy among social media users, particularly on platforms like Facebook, where people tend to believe and share information without proper discernment. Social media, particularly Facebook, has faced criticism for its role in fueling rumors and contributing to societal chaos. Facebook users are known to actively engage with content, scrolling through pages, reading newsfeeds, and sharing information. The platform has witnessed a surge in interactions as internet usage continues to grow across diverse demographics. Regardless of age or educational background, individuals are increasingly creating Facebook accounts to stay connected to the global information hub and remain updated about current events. The absence of Facebook is perceived as a disconnection from the world, with many feeling alienated without its presence.

The findings from FGDs and KIIs indicate that many users often emotionally share content on Facebook without fully understanding its accuracy, leading to the spread of misinformation. This phenomenon has been observed in various studies, including one conducted by SACMID in June 2019, titled 'Media literacy among students at secondary schools and madrasas of Bangladesh.'⁴⁷ The study highlights that most students do not verify information before sharing it on social media, allowing fake news and misinformation to spread rapidly.

This was backed by the survey, in which 46% of respondents identified Facebook as the primary source of disinformation, while 20% viewed YouTube as the main culprit (Figure 23). According to a male KII in Chattogram, individuals with limited education and awareness are particularly

vulnerable to mis-/disinformation and hate speech. Some malicious actors intentionally produce and disseminate sensational content through these platforms due to the lack of editorial processes and gatekeeping, contributing to the problem of disinformation. The government has responded to this issue by implementing stricter legal measures to curb these malpractices by vested interest groups. However, some KIIs argue that such stringent digital laws namely the DSA often leads to mainstream media neglecting or overlooking issues that are significant to the public and society as a whole, thereby negatively impacting the nation at large.

Figure 23. Frequency distribution of the responses on top three social media sources of disinformation



“In spreading mis-/disinformation, some journalists are equally accountable. Some online news portals cover news from unverified social media sources without understanding the consequences. On the other hand, some mainstream news media having inadequate staffs also depend on social media platforms and cover news without much verification.”

— Male KII, who is a senior journalist in Chattogram

Regarding election-related mis-/disinformation and hate speech, FGD participants noted that supporters and relatives of the candidates often utilize social media to spread false information

about other candidates and to promote their candidates. In Dhaka, some participants from a youth group mentioned that certain hard-liners and radical Muslims exploit religious sentiments to promote hate speech during elections. Additionally, some participants observed that certain news media outlets propagate misinformation for the sake of increasing their popularity.

Combating Mis-/disinformation

Presently, it is stressed on fact-checking to ensure more accuracy in media reporting. The FGDs with the journalists group show that only a few journalists have some sorts of understanding of the fact checking with the use of technologies/software like reverse image, wiki check, etc. The journalists taking part in FGDS from Mymensingh and Barishal said, “We don’t use fact checking software and apps since we don’t know much of those.”

The journalists view that the mis-/disinformation spread due to the lack of fact checking properly, especially from those news items shared through the social media platforms. The journalists taking part in FGDs from Mymensingh said that as an effective measure to combat mis-/disinformation, they give rejoinder (report again) if any report is covered based on wrong information. The journalists also said, in case of any fake information or rumor, they dig deep, find the fact and report accurately. But, sometimes, the process takes long time that hampers peaceful community life.

To combat mis-/disinformation, the multimedia unit of Bangladesh police has recently produced an audio-visual content which is publicized through some of the television channels. A few NGOs and citizen forums sometimes hold some sorts of programmes like rally, group meetings, seminar etc. to raise awareness on the issue.

2.12 Relevant Actors in Information Delivery

The survey, FGD, and KII have shed light on the capacity of actors involved in the information delivery process. Expert opinions highlight the crucial role of skilled and dedicated media professionals in ensuring media accuracy. While respondents perceive Bangladesh news media to be somewhat accurate, the FGD with journalists and KII findings reveal a lack of institutionalization and competent media personnel in the country. Insufficient policies regarding promotion, salary, fringe benefits, and job facilities for journalists discourage talented individuals from pursuing careers in the field. Media houses often fail to provide necessary support for professional growth, resulting in limited opportunities for advancement. Additionally, inadequate logistical support, especially for women, in terms of transportation and resources for

reporting further hampers media accuracy and professional commitment. These factors collectively impact the overall quality of media output, as expressed by the stakeholders involved.

2.12.a The Role of CSOs

In Bangladesh, the rise of digital and social media platforms has brought attention to the urgent need to combat disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech. However, only a limited number of CSOs are actively addressing these challenges, while the activities of other NGOs working through networking remain less visible. During a FGD with the CSOs, participants suggested that CSOs could play a vital role in the voting process by monitoring elections and assisting law enforcement agencies in preventing election-related violence. One CSO participant from Chattogram expressed concerns about the difficulty in engaging young voters who are often absorbed in their mobile devices. Additionally, when CSOs attempt to provide information related to elections, they are sometimes perceived as agents of political parties by these young individuals.



Focused Group Discussion at the Teachers' Institute in Barishal city. Journalists, teachers, social workers, and religious leaders took part in the session. The FGD was facilitated by Sharifa Shirin, an Assistant Professor of Journalism Department at Barishal University. *Internews/Shakawat Hossain*

The following organizations were identified by the study team and KII as CSOs currently working on media literacy and disinformation in Bangladesh:

South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID) is a Media Development Organization fostering media development in Bangladesh. It has two broad areas of concentration: media and information literacy and gender literacy in media. Of the programmes around mis-/disinformation, SACMID's project titled 'Promoting Media Literacy in Bangladesh' is a mentionable one.

Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment (VOICE) runs a program on [Counter hate speech and misinformation](#) that focuses on capacity building for various groups, including journalists, activists, artists, filmmakers, bloggers, and university students. Their initiatives aim to counter hate speech and misinformation while promoting responsible use of digital space and has implemented a project specifically addressing the COVID-19 communication crisis and misinformation in the country.⁴⁸

The Institute for Environment and Development (IED) is currently implementing the [Strengthening traditional civil society to combat digital disinformation in Bangladesh project](#). They plan to conduct capacity-building workshops and training for civil society members and youth, enabling them to identify and counter malicious digital content. The activities aim to help participants recognize ideological standpoints and intentions behind suspicious social media content, promoting tolerance, harmony, gender sensitivity, and non-violence in both mainstream and viral online platforms.

Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) is currently implementing the [Promoting Fact-Checking to Counter Misinformation in Bangladesh project](#), which involves specific activities such as training content development meetings, media literacy sessions, fact-checking training for journalists, youth groups, and journalism teachers, as well as training for peer educator journalists, youth groups, and journalism teachers.

Article 19 launched an online media literacy course and called for [a National Plan of Action](#) against hate speech on June 17, 2022.

[Move Foundation](#) conducts campaigns to counter misinformation, disinformation, and hate speeches through various programs, such as organizing seminars on combating the infodemic and extremism.

[Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik](#) (SHUJAN) is one of the vibrant organizations that works in observing the election. The organization brings rival candidates onto a common platform to face the public, conducts press conferences to demand free, impartial, and fair elections, organizes poster and leaflet campaigns to promote the selection of well-qualified candidates, and holds human chain activities to call for free and fair elections in a peaceful environment.

Bangladesh civil society is facing challenges in countering disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech due to their limited readiness in terms of abilities, skills, and resources. Many CSOs are unfamiliar with these issues and lack the financial resources and knowledge-based content to address them effectively. The scarcity of experts in producing content to combat mis/disinformation and hate speech further exacerbates the situation, as these problems have arisen from the rapid growth of digital and social media platforms in Bangladesh. The easy accessibility of smartphones has also contributed to the spread of these issues, with one CSO representative likening smartphones to “hand grenades” used for disseminating harmful content. The CSOs in Dhaka, the capital city, acknowledge their lack of necessary abilities, skills, and financial support to tackle this issue, while those operating outside Dhaka rely on project-based financial aid and donations from local organizations or individuals.



IEA Data Enumerator Abdul Jalil is conducting a survey with Nahida Akter (30) at South Pangashia village under Dumki Upazila/sub-district of Patuakhali at the southern part of Bangladesh. *Internews/Shakawat Hossain*

2.12.b Challenges and Opportunities to strengthening the capacity of civil society

Challenges

Subtle challenges in countering mis-/disinformation and hate speech include limited financial resources, lack of technical expertise, and the influence of local political contexts.⁴⁹ NGOs

and CSOs often rely on government support and cooperation for their work, especially when engaging with stakeholders like media personnel, local government, and administrations.⁵⁰ Approval from authorities is essential, as local administrators may refuse to attend awareness programs without proper authorization. Further constraints in financial resources, access to necessary devices like computers and cameras, and CSO's ability to plan and create suitable content for various media platforms. The lack of knowledge and skills in portraying gender issues fairly through media is evident, necessitating both theoretical understanding and technical expertise in audio-visual content production, manual and module development, and conducting formative studies.

Opportunities

Promoting media literacy among youth leaders and grassroots-level CSOs can be achieved through collaborations with experts and academia. Several NGOs and CSOs, such as Proshika, BRAC, ASA, Jaago Foundation, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Bangladesh Jatiya Protibondhi Kalyan Foundation, Consumers Association of Bangladesh, SACMID, VOICE, MOVE Foundation, Article 19, MRDI, Institute for Environment and Development (IED), and Jonouddog, have extensive experience in raising awareness on various socio-economic issues. Leveraging their expertise, these organizations can effectively combat misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. Representatives from Proshika, Consumers Association of Bangladesh, Article 19, Jonouddog, SACMID, and VOICE have expressed interest in participating in capacity-building activities, including training, workshops, and ToT programs focused on countering mis-/disinformation and hate speech, as well as improving fair content production for awareness-raising purposes.



Data Enumerator Sanjida Islam Jui conducts a survey at Laladighir Par of Barishal city with Jolekha Begum (18), a person with disability. *Internews/Shakawat Hossain*

Chapter Three: Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings suggest that both the media and its audiences are on a shift with the transformation of media and communication technology in Bangladesh. Most of the respondents (85%) own smartphones to access information and entertainment. The use of traditional news media like the newspaper and the radio is declining. However, television is still a popular medium to 80% of respondents. The women and the PWDs are lagging in terms of having smart media devices. Despite enhanced use of internet-based media and communication platforms, people living in remote areas suffer from the weak network and high subscription cost. In the race of using social media, there depicts a clear disparity among the PWDs and the women since the youth are in advanced position.

Facebook is the most popular social media platform being used by 68% respondents. With the rise of social and digital media platforms in Bangladesh, prevalence of mis-/disinformation is also noticeable. The study finds that most of the users are not adequately aware of this phenomenon. Bangladesh media are not free from biases in covering political and electoral news for perceived ideological/political affiliations of the media owners/managers/leaders. Some draconian laws like the DSA 2018, OSA 1923, the Penal Code, 1860 seem visible threats to media freedom. Lack of knowledge and skills of the journalists in the areas of fact-checking and combating fake information is also a barrier to media accuracy.

The study reveals that the community people lack necessary information on election and politics either from the news media or the social media platforms. Social media is not credible enough to depend on due to its self-generated nature of content creation and dissemination without formal editorial control. Conversely, the mainstream news media are biased in covering political and electoral affairs. They must face pressures from diverse quarters that hinder their freedom.

Social media generated menaces like mis-/disinformation sometimes create anarchic situation in Bangladesh affecting communal peace and harmony. As these issues are relatively new for both media workers and CSOs, they lack the knowledge, skills and awareness to tackle these matters. As a response to this, there is a need for increased awareness and training to develop techniques and tactics to tackle the menace of social media effectively. Both the media people and the CSO need knowledge and skills in the fields of fact-checking and managing social

media menace to deal with mis-/disinformation more effectively.

The study shows that the women, PWDs and the youth-all the groups need information on elections that include safety and security measures, proper use of EVM, voting procedure, electoral atmosphere, activities of law enforcing agencies and the election commission, and so on.

Recommendations

The recommendations have been based on the findings derived from all the methods: literature review, questionnaire survey, FGD and KII:

[Note: Short-term implementation (1 year), Mid-term 2-3 Years and Long-term 4-5 Years]

Findings	Conclusion	Recommendations	Years				
			1	2	3	4	5
Media and Journalism							
Many journalists lack training in election reporting, particularly in investigative and interpretive journalism.	Journalists covering elections require specialized knowledge in media reporting techniques and electoral affairs, including laws, regulations, policies, and the structure of election commissions and administrative bodies.	Collaborate with government organizations like the Press Institute Bangladesh and also with the NGOs providing journalists' training and with the Universities having journalism department in order to arrange a comprehensive nationwide training and workshop package with fellowship program. ⁵¹	X				
Draconian laws such as the DSA 2018, OSA 1923, and Penal Code 1860 hinder investigative journalism in Bangladesh.	Under these laws, Journalists face harassment and arrests from power elites, politicians and others whose interests are at risk of being reported.	Form a robust policy advocacy forum with stakeholders such as journalists' leaders, civil society members, media, academics, researchers, donor agencies/ development partners, and like-minded policymakers to advocate for repealing objectionable clauses in oppressive laws.		X	X		
Bangladesh news media are undergoing major transformations due to the rise of social and digital media, technological evolution, and changing media ownership.	The majority of news media are unprepared for changes in revenue generation, technological adoption, corporate management, and staff capacity development.	Capacity building for media professionals should focus on addressing challenges related to social and digital media, revenue generation, and understanding technological advancements.		X	X		

Findings	Conclusion	Recommendations	Years				
			1	2	3	4	5
Corporate news media lack standard operating procedures and accountability in their management policies, often prioritizing their own interests over the needs of their staff.	News media owners typically lack accountability for their operational systems, including staff recruitment, capacity building, promotion, and firing. During COVID-19, numerous journalists were abruptly fired without sufficient justification.	To enhance accountability, the establishment of a multipartite body or task force consisting of journalists, media owners, civil society representatives, and relevant government departments is recommended. This task force should oversee the corporate news media, aiming to streamline institutional practices by creating a comprehensive standard operational procedure (SOP) that includes robust HR policies covering recruitment, promotion, incentives, insurance, and fringe benefits for media professionals.			X	X	
Election Information			1	2	3	4	5
There is no comprehensive communication policy to effectively provide electoral information to marginalized communities.	Marginalized communities lack sufficient and accurate information about electoral systems, political parties, and candidates.	Implementing a comprehensive communication policy is crucial to ensure underprivileged communities receive adequate information through planned communication activities.	X	X			
Insufficient information exists regarding the safety and security of PWDs, women voters, and other election-related concerns.	Due to security concerns, many women and PWDs express reluctance to visit voting centers.	Utilize various media platforms, including satellite TV channels, radio, leading newspapers, online news portals, Facebook, YouTube, to disseminate audio-visual content, raising awareness among youth voters about their rights, while also conducting communication campaigns for women and PWDs on voting center safety and overall election environment.	X				
Target groups generally lack sufficient election-related information, leading to difficulties in making informed voting decisions.	Bangladeshis lack sufficient election-related information, with inadequate content on social media regarding election issues. The Election Commission's efforts to raise awareness about elections are insufficient.	Promote paid ads and audio-visual content on election rules, procedures, code of conduct, safety measures for women, PWDs, and senior citizens through popular social media, TV channels, and group communication platforms.	X				

Findings	Conclusion	Recommendations	Years				
			1	2	3	4	5
Mis-/Disinformation							
There is a severe lack of knowledge and understanding in properly using social media and identifying mis/disinformation.	Social media-generated mis/disinformation often disrupts communal harmony, but informed youth can combat rumors positively.	Youth should be trained in media literacy and fact-checking to become social media leaders capable of organizing peers and combating mis/disinformation.		X	X		
Journalists in Bangladesh predominantly rely on traditional fact-checking techniques, which offer limited effectiveness in combating mis/disinformation.	Mis/disinformation hampers media accuracy, but improved knowledge enables media professionals to effectively verify information.	Arrange fact-checking workshops for journalists to enhance their ability to deliver news with greater accuracy.	X	X			
CSOs generally lack the capacity to address emerging social media threats and mis/disinformation due to their limited experience.	CSOs require enhanced knowledge and understanding of mis/disinformation and effective techniques to appropriately handle it.	Conduct media literacy ToT workshops for CSOs, focusing on handling mis/disinformation and promoting information literacy.	X	X	X		
Countering mis/and disinformation is necessary to manage social media menace and sustain communal harmony.	Social media-generated mis/disinformation can spark violence, disrupting communal harmony and creating anarchic situations, benefiting certain interest groups.	<p>a. Initiate a nationwide campaign for media literacy, including integrating courses into school curriculums to educate children.</p> <p>b. Establish a country-wide network involving journalists, CSOs, public representatives, and government officials, enhancing their capacity to address mis/disinformation and hate speech.</p> <p>c. Conduct training for CSOs/CBOs at the district and sub-district (upazila) levels on fact-checking, enabling them to play an effective role in curbing the spread of rumors and fake news.</p>		X	X		

Findings	Conclusion	Recommendations	Years				
			1	2	3	4	5
Youth, Women, PWD Access to Information			1	2	3	4	5
The information needs of marginalized communities, such as women and PWDs, are often overlooked or neglected.	The lack of journalists from marginalized communities' results in their issues being underrepresented and often muted.	Create and nurture a diverse pool of journalists from underserved communities, including women, PWDs, and ethnic groups, to amplify their stories and voices.	X	X	X		
PWDs lack access to relevant media content.	Some PWD organizations like DRRA are developing apps to enhance their communities' ability to access to diverse media content.	An integrated effort can address the issue of access to media content among the PWDS. Knowledge sharing i.e. the best practices can be shared among PWD organizations. Internews partners can facilitate this.	X	X	X		
Financial insolvency and network fluctuation hinder underprivileged individuals' access to essential internet services.	Underprivileged individuals in Bangladesh face limited internet access due to high costs and unstable connectivity, leading to frequent communication interruptions.	To improve the internet connectivity, initiate advocacy with mobile network operators and their regulatory bodies to get the price down and make the connectivity stable.					
Media literacy in Bangladesh is crucial, given the convergence of social and digital media platforms.	In Bangladesh, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the effective use of media, particularly social and digital media platforms.	Facilitate the establishment of a sustainable youth network focused on developing media literacy skills, particularly in social and digital media. Provide training, support, and tools to empower youth in contributing to Bangladesh's socio-economic and cultural development through the creation and dissemination of valuable content.	X	X	X		
Around the Project			1	2	3	4	5
A trainees' network will be formed around fact-checking and election reporting	Such network needs to sustain and active through various activities	Occasional in-person meeting needs to be arranged for sharing experience and exploring further activities.		X	X	X	X
Disinformation trend analysis and discussion	Will generate empirical database to understand the nature of disinformation better.	Internews should capacitate the partners so that they can independently carry out such trend analysis		X	X	X	X

Findings	Conclusion	Recommendations	Years			
ToT and Follow-up training on fact-checking and election reporting being conducted.	A good number of resource persons will be developed.	Facilitate the media houses to arrange intensive in-house training on various specialized subjects like gender reporting, investigative journalism, etc. which will be more effective rather than sporadic/random selection of the trainees from different media	X	X	X	X
Mentorship support & Story Grants	A number of good stories will be covered.	The stories need to be stored for the use of interested /prospective journalists, students and teachers.	X	X	X	X



IEA Data Enumerator Sanjida Islam Jui is conducting a survey with Mohammad Belal (22), a student of the Journalism Department at Barishal University. *Internews/Shakawat Hossain*

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Annex I

Detailed Quantitative and Qualitative Survey Methodology

The IEA research methodology employs a combined qualitative and quantitative approach, examining the supply and demand aspects of media relevant to Bangladesh's elections. The supply side analysis encompasses the national and community media landscape, evaluating traditional and digital media, the media industry environment, legal regulations, and media capabilities. In addition to assessing the capacity of media outlets, the study also focuses on the community's demand side of the information ecosystem, considering informal, cultural, and social factors that impact information needs, access, sharing, trust, influence, and information literacy. These factors have the potential to disrupt or corrupt community information flows through the spread of rumors, misinformation, and propaganda.

The research methodology applied is a combination of an interactive, action-oriented, do no harm approach. Data collection follows ethical standards and allows the equal participation of male and female youth, adults, and people with disability, especially those in remote areas. Through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the expert focuses on researching and analyzing the country's information flow and information disorder pertinent to election. *Internews* and the partners jointly decide on the criteria for selection of the locations, taking into account the size of populations and the issues around access to information. *Internews*, the IEA expert, and partners decide on the research design and methodology together, putting into consideration both organizations' experience and history relevant to the local context and key issues.

Primary data was gathered through a quantitative survey, FGD and KII. The data and information emerged from all these methods facilitate the research team to do an effective triangulation of analysis.

Secondary data was collected through rigorous desk research, utilizing relevant literature, documents such as study reports, media reports, and research articles (see Table 1). Additional sources included *Internews* IEA guidelines, Preliminary Census report 2022 from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, NGO and CSO reports, Bangladesh Labour Force Survey Reports, and relevant printed reports and books. Findings from the desk review informed the research questions used in FGD and KII (see below).

Table i. Types and number of literatures reviewed⁵²

S/N	Type of literature/documents	Number
01	Newspaper reports and articles	07
02	Research articles in academic journals	06
03	NGO/CSO reports	05
04	Government study reports/website publications	04
05	Miscellaneous	04

Major Research Questions

The assessment is based upon the following major questions:

The role of media

- To what extent do the media in Bangladesh produce stories and reports that are accurate and impartial?
- What information gaps are being addressed by the media? Are they adequate and/or effective? If not, what could be done to improve adequacy and effectiveness?
- How effective (or not) is the media in the target audiences' decision to vote? What are the determinants of effectiveness and why?
- How has COVID-19 affected the media and information consumption of political and electoral processes?
- What are the challenges and opportunities to improve media accuracy and impartiality on the election process?

Community Information needs

- Which information sources are most trusted by target groups and why?
- What does trust mean to the target groups?
- Which communities are the most underserved and how to best fill their information gaps?
- What are the barriers to access to information, for example mobile and/or internet penetration, literacy rates, underfunding, etc.?
- What is the media content and format/type to which our target groups are most engaged with?

Elections and disinformation

- Which sources of information, particularly around political and electoral process, are mostly followed by target groups and why?
- What are the effective measures to combat mis/disinformation, awareness, regulations, tools, media literacy when it comes to elections and political processes?
- Who are the key players and networks involved in elections and political related disinformation operations and campaigns? How do they cascade disinformation?
- What social media platforms, traditional media channels, and other channels are used to spread disinformation?
- What is the level of awareness of disinformation among the target groups? And how do they navigate around disinformation?

Role of Civil society

- To what extent has civil society been engaged in countering disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?
- To what extent is civil society equipped to counter disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?
- What are the opportunities and challenges to strengthening the capacity of civil society to counter disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?

Quantitative Survey

In order to carry out the IEA, the team conducted a questionnaire survey. The sample size for the survey included a diverse representation of regions, age groups, gender, education and occupational backgrounds, income groups and persons with disabilities. The survey team conducted face to face interviews while some KIIs were carried out through phone interviews and online platforms like Zoom and Google meet. The survey abides by a solid reference⁵³ of the statistical standard.

To ensure diversity of the survey, the study team identified four divisions: Barishal, Chattogram, Dhaka and Mymensingh for the assessment. Dhaka is included as the capital of Bangladesh; Chattogram is the business capital and the second largest division; Mymensingh is the newest division and has the lowest literacy rates; and Barishal is a coastal zone with diverse geographic, socio-economic, demographic traits.

In Table ii below, the preliminary report on the population and housing census from 2022 by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows that the selected divisions have a total of

4,97,73,981 women, 2,17,11,390 youth and 12,54,177 PWD.

Table ii. Division wise-target population

Name of Division	Population ⁵⁴		
	Women	Youth ⁵⁵	People with disability
Dhaka	21,721,556	9,720,910	474,988
Chattogram	17,160,140	7,301,082	444,606
Mymensingh	6,233,864	2,688,336	188,043
Barishal	4,658,421	2,001,061	146,540
Total	49,773,981	21,711,390	1,254,177

Statistical Determination of Sample Size

The sample size for the quantitative survey has been calculated by applying the following statistical formula outlined by Taro Yamane:

We know that:

$$SS = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Here, SS =Sample size

N=Sum of targeted populations⁵⁶

e=degree of error consideration is 0.05 or 5%

$$SS = \frac{72,739,548}{1 + 72,739,548 * (0.05)^2}$$

Or 72,739,548 /1+181,893.86

or SS= 399.9=400

Considering design effect for the social survey in Bangladesh, researchers usually set design effect from 1.1 to 1.2. So, with 1.2 design effect, the sample population is (400 * 1.2) = 480. It can be said that it requires at least 400 sample population for a standard and statistically sound survey. However, to get more data, generate stronger database and more accurate data, survey population has been drawn at 480 respondents with a design effect of 1.2 mentioned earlier.

Target Groups⁵⁷ Sample Distribution: Survey Location and Justification

The questionnaire survey specifically targets three groups: women, youth, and PWD. According to the BBS, women make up 50% of the total population. While the exact demographic information for youth (aged 18-29) is not available in the latest Census Report 2022, it is estimated to be around 22%. On the other hand, persons with disabilities constitute less than 2% of the population. The sample population for the survey is as follows: 328 for women, 143 for youth, and only 9 for persons with disabilities. To adjust for the small number of persons with disabilities, their population is derived by allocating 10% of the total sample size from the women category for a total of 42. After adjustment, the sample size for each category is as follows:

Table iii. Target group sample distribution

TG Category	Planned		Covered	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Women	295	61%	293	61%
Youth	143	30%	143	31%
Persons with disability (PWD)	42	9%	38	8%
Total	480	100.0	480	100.0

The sample size for each category is proportionate to the size of each location. The survey was carried out following a multi-staged sampling from national to divisional to district to sub-district (upazila) to union (lowest administrative unit) to the village as primary sampling unit (PSU). Out of the 480 respondents, the highest number, 211 (44%), are from Dhaka division, followed by 164 (34%) respondents from Chattogram division, 58 (12%) from Mymensingh division, and 47 (10%) from Barishal division (Table iv).



Table iv. Division wise distribution of sample population

Division	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Dhaka	211	44
Chattogram	164	34
Barishal	47	10

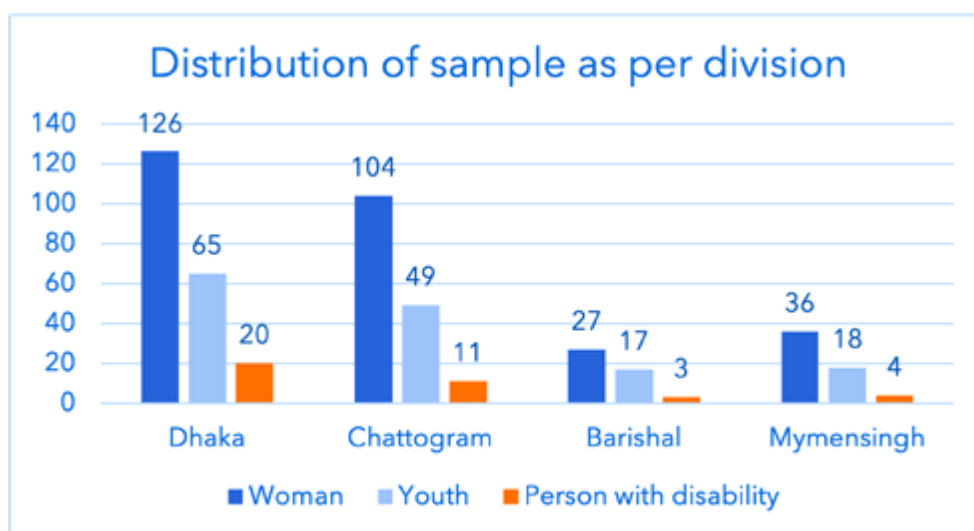
Division	Frequency	Percent (n=480)
Mymensingh	58	12
Total	480	100

Table v. Division-wise population and distribution of planned and actual sample

Name of Division	Population			Sample size planned and covered					
	Women	Youth ⁵⁹	PWD	Women		Youth		PWD	
				Planned	Covered	Planned	Covered	Planned	Covered
Dhaka	2,17,21,556	97,20,910	4,74,988	129	126	62	65	19	20
Chattogram	1,71,60,140	73,01,082	4,44,606	104	104	48	49	14	11
Barishal	46,58,421	20,01,061	1,46,540	28	27	15	17	03	03
Mymensingh	62,33,864	26,88,336	1,88,043	36	36	18	18	06	04
Total	4,97,73,981	2,17,11,390	12,54,177	297	293	143	149	42	38

Distribution of sample size as per study location and category of respondents

The study included four divisions: Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, and Barishal. Two districts were chosen from each division (Dhaka and Munshiganj, Chattogram and Khagrachari, Mymensingh and Sherpur) except Barishal, where only Patuakhali district was selected due to its smaller sample size. District selection considered distance and rural characteristics, excluding divisional headquarters.



Survey parameters

While selecting individual samples, the following aspects were taken into considerations:

- Region — urban, semi-urban and rural areas
- Gender
- Persons with disability
- Youth of 18-29 years Occupation
- Education
- Other factors identified in consultation with Internews and its partners

Selection of Individual Respondents

There was a basic question from where to start collecting data since a primary sampling unit (PSU) i.e., village or ward covered a considerable area. Data enumerators were directed to reach the center of a PSU and visit every 5th house to find appropriate respondents, approaching them based on the data collection matrix containing criteria. In case of unavailability of the expected respondents, the data collectors visited the next house.

In urban areas, every 10th apartment is surveyed to find potential respondents. This method accounts for high population density, especially in cities like Dhaka. Random sampling is employed to select respondents, excluding PWD.

With a mere 1.4% representation of PWDs in Bangladesh, locating them posed a significant challenge. To address this, strategies such as snowball sampling and reaching out to Union Parishad⁶⁰(UP members and other acquaintances were adopted to identify participants.

Qualitative Approaches

In order to gain insights into the community's media consumption habits, election-related information needs, social media usage, media literacy, and perceptions of media accuracy and impartiality, 20 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. These FGDs included five different groups: youth, women, marginalized individuals, journalists, and CSOs. Each division had five FGDs, one for each category (Table vi). A total of 51 youth and 36 women participated in FGDs across four divisions, alongside 35 marginalized individuals, 39 journalists, and 38 CSO representatives (Figure iv).

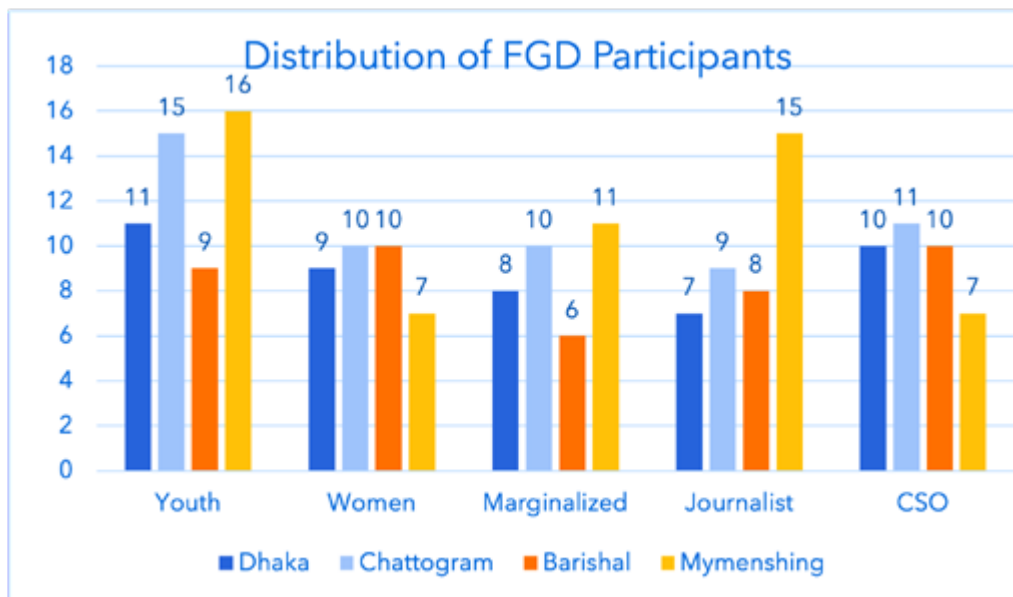


Table vi. FGD Location and Distribution

Categories	Number	Location	No. of FGD participants	Participant selection criteria and process
Women participants	4	Dhaka=1 Chattogram=1 Mymensingh=1 Barishal=1	36	Age 30-60, various profession
Youth communities: including social media users	4	Dhaka=1 Chattogram=1 Mymensingh=1 Barishal=1	51	Age 18-29, various profession
Marginalized communities: PWD, ethnic minority, indigenous people	4	Dhaka=1 Chattogram=1 Mymensingh=1 Barishal=1	35	Community contact person and the field level enumerator will help to gather

Categories	Number	Location	No. of FGD participants	Participant selection criteria and process
Local journalists	4	Dhaka=1 Chattogram=1 Mymensingh=1 Barishal=1	39	Do
Local government representatives, NGO workers, community opinion leaders, local cultural group member	4	Dhaka=1 Chattogram=1 Mymensingh=1 Barishal=1	38	Do
Total	20	All locations	199	

In addition, 40 Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with media experts, CSOs, Government officials, and women activists (Table vii).

Table vii. KII Distribution

Categories	Number	Location
Governmental officials from the Ministry of Information/DFP/PIB	01	Dhaka
Media managers and senior journalists: print media, broadcast media and online news portals	16 (4 per location)	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal
Online activists/bloggers/social media champions	04	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal
Journalists/press club/union representatives	04	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal
Internews and partner's key personnel	04	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal
Representatives of disability organizations, NGOs combating mis/disinformation, human rights defenders, and Right to Information experts.	06	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal
Women activists, youth leaders, PWD, and Representatives of Gender Diverse Populations' (LGBTQ) organization	04	Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, Barishal

Data gathering, management and analysis

A simple and systematic random sampling procedure is adopted in gathering data. A pre-designed and pre-tested questionnaire is used to conduct the survey interviews. The team leader and the survey supervisors supervise the field level enumerators. The survey is conducted using printed questionnaires, so all the questionnaires are stored under key locked to maintain safety and security. Survey data from every location is arranged in a separate file with a specific code number. All the filled-in questionnaires are coded accordingly. Moreover, the name of the survey location is mentioned properly so that data can be easily recognized. The raw hand notes on FGD as well as the audio recordings with transcription are stored properly. The research team checked and verified the data for any error that might arise due to oversight or other human errors. Errors are detected and corrected to ensure accuracy.

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) has developed a set of comprehensive ethical standards (revised in April 2021)⁶¹ for carrying out social surveys of which a few key principles were followed to deal with the personally identifiable information (PII):

- Recognizing the right of participants to be provided with honest and forthright information about how personally identifiable information that we collect from them will be used.
- Recognizing the importance of preventing unintended disclosure of personally identifiable information. We acted in accordance with all relevant best practices, laws, regulations, and data owner rules governing the handling and storage of such information.
- Avoiding disclosing any information that could be used, alone or in combination with other reasonably available information, to identify participants with their data (name, position and any identifiable information), without participant's permission.

Data Analysis

Members of the research team analyze the survey data in SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) and prepare the draft report. Frequency, percentage, and categorical values (from cross tabulation) are figured out and used in the study report. Graphs and charts are also produced from the numerical findings to use in the report.

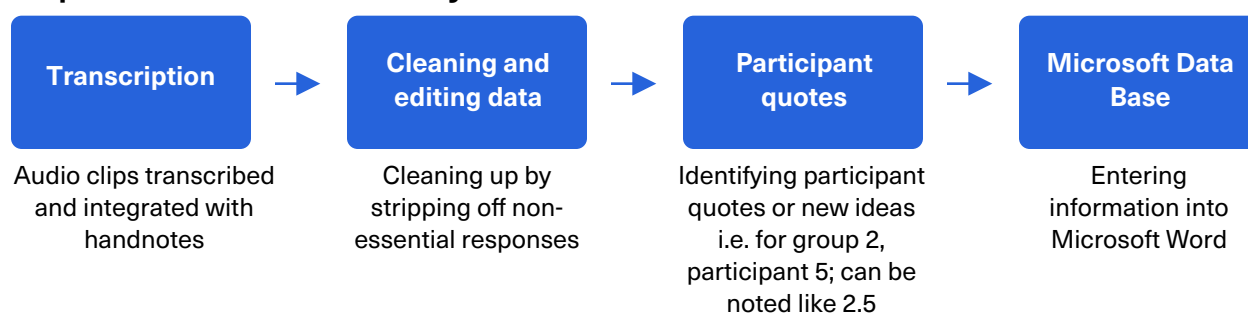
Approach 1— Analysis for questionnaire survey

Objective	Key Research Questions	Findings from Questionnaire Survey
Analyzing the target group's media and information consumption habits and needs	What type of media or communication channels/platforms do you use for availing information and how much (frequently) do you use them?	Question based findings, % of the survey respondents

Approach 2: Analysis for Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data emerged from FGD and KII are analyzed thematically by making use of narrative analysis. Codes are developed and applied in two rounds of coding, using thematic analysis and color codes. Dominant themes, relationships and patterns are identified through the systematic review of interviews, FGDs, and compared with findings in the literature and from the quantitative data survey. Salient concepts are coded, and their occurrence and reoccurrence are labeled manually. Data organization, categorization and synthetization are made accordingly so that the survey data is possible to complement and supplement through a proper triangulation. In order to analyze the FGD and KII data, colour sorting approach (manually and using Microsoft word and Microsoft excel) is used to identify the most frequent, frequent and rare responses on specific issues. In addition to these, direct quotations are used in the report. The FGD data analysis undergo some specific steps i.e., moderating the FGD, recording the discussion with consent from the participants, taking attendance, running hand notes on discussion, audio recording (and if possible audio-visual recording with consent). Soon after the memory remains afresh, the recorded audio clips are transcribed in English.

Steps in FGD and KII Data Analysis



Then the running notes and transcription are matched together, and the information are coded under the thematic areas. Then the color sorting methods are used to identify the frequency and strength of the responses:

- All the participants
- Almost all

- Most of the participants
- About half of the participants
- Some of the participants
- Rare responses

In the study report, these findings are supplemented and complemented with the questionnaire survey.

Integration between quantitative and qualitative data

Objective	Key Research Questions	Findings from Questionnaire Survey	Relevant Findings from FGD	Relevant Findings from KII
Analyzing the target group's media and information consumption habits and needs	What type of media or communication channels/platforms do you use for availing information and how much (frequently) do you use them?	Question based findings/ thematic: % of the survey respondents	Qualitative perspectives/narratives: Reasons for using stated/said type of media	Qualitative perspectives/ narratives: Supplementing from the KII findings (if requires)

Study Limitations and Overcoming Strategies

The study has some limitations of which the major ones include the followings:

- The extreme cold delayed data collection in Chattogram's hilly region, resulting in a slight delay in gathering the required information. The research team included enumerator from the hilly region having very good understanding of the local weather and environment who visited and interacted with the respondents as and when the weather favored.
- It was difficult to find and recruit suitable female and PWD respondents. Snowball sampling procedure was a useful technique to reach the expected respondents. Moreover, local opinion leaders and better-informed people supported to locate the expected respondents.
- FGD and KII participants expressed concern or declined to participate in the study due to the sensitive nature of the subject. More motivation and persuasion were needed along with assurance of maintaining their identity as confidential.
- Data collectors faced rejection and were barred from entering certain areas. Local contact persons helped for easing their access.
- Being unique and diverse in nature, the study should have covered more samples from

more regions for better capturing data in a more comprehensive way.

- The subject of the study is very new in Bangladesh with people generally lacking understanding, particularly regarding certain terms and topics.
- The survey was conducted in four divisions on 480 sample populations. Including more divisions and sample population would facilitate the team to collect data more comprehensively. However, qualitative data were supportive to understand the situation effectively.



Annex 2

Baseline Findings

EQ I.2.2.I: To what extent do the media in Bangladesh produce stories and reports that are accurate and impartial?

Before 1990s, the dominant media in Bangladesh was the print media i.e., the newspapers and magazines. In that period, only two state-run broadcast channels, the Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar (radio) were in operation. In a span of three decades, television has become the most popular broadcast medium in Bangladesh.⁶² At present, there are 39 Television channels comprising 20 mixed entertainment channels, nine news-focused channels, four state-owned channels and five channels are mainly subject-based focusing on sports, music, business, infotainment, and child entertainment.⁶³ To date the news media landscape in Bangladesh is still dominated by print media. Based on the data published in November 2022 by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, there are 455 daily newspapers.⁶⁴ Despite the massive number of news media in Bangladesh, researchers and media academics argue that the news media are too partisan and biased towards power and politics.

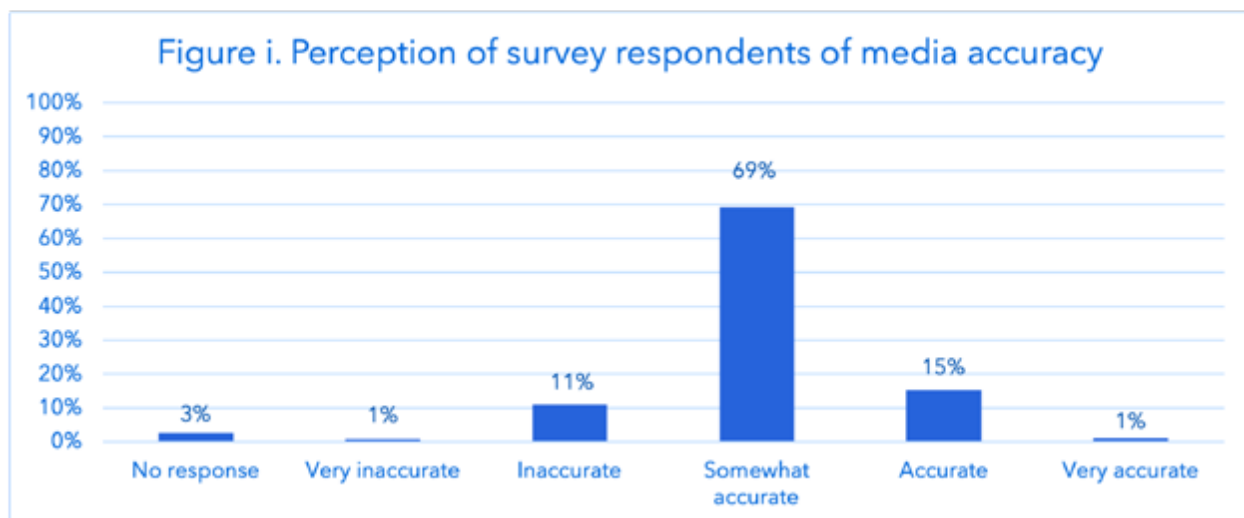
A study entitled 'Credibility of News and Expansion of Television Media in Bangladesh,' Nipu (2016, p. 39) argues that credibility of television news in Bangladesh faces some challenges including presentation of inaccurate information as a result of unhealthy competition, affiliation with the political parties and dependence on the corporate branding,⁶⁵ Islam (2016) finds in a study that the television channels in Bangladesh are strongly dominated by power, politics and influence of the elite classes where the 'face and protocol values' are considered for news reports rather than the 'news values' of an issue, event or affair. The ruling political party usually gets priority in television news.⁶⁶ He also finds the state-run BTV operated by the people's revenue, does not consider the interest of the masses. Rather, it plays a role as the mouthpiece of the government through showing its bold partiality to some of the identical faces of the government and the ruling political party. Thus, the TV media sidelines or bypasses the majority of the people through ignoring their issues.

Haider (2007) conducted a content analysis on three private TV channels in the country where he found the political news getting the highest priority. He also showed that the coverage was slanted towards the political ideology of the channels. One of the significant aspects of the TV news coverage was that they prioritized the protocol values rather than news values by giving importance on the certain Members of the Parliament and Ministers.⁶⁷ These findings can be

supported with the arguments of Rahman & Alam (2013, p. 202) who revealed that the reasons behind the proliferation of television channels is the practice of using them as a tool for ideological persuasion by the ruling class.⁶⁸ Ferdous (2009, p. 18) argues, Bangladesh media are pro-elite, having urban focus and male dominance in the content. The media, changing their nature towards free-market economy, do not show much interest to capture the struggles of the underprivileged classes and the common masses, who are the overwhelming majority in the country.⁶⁹

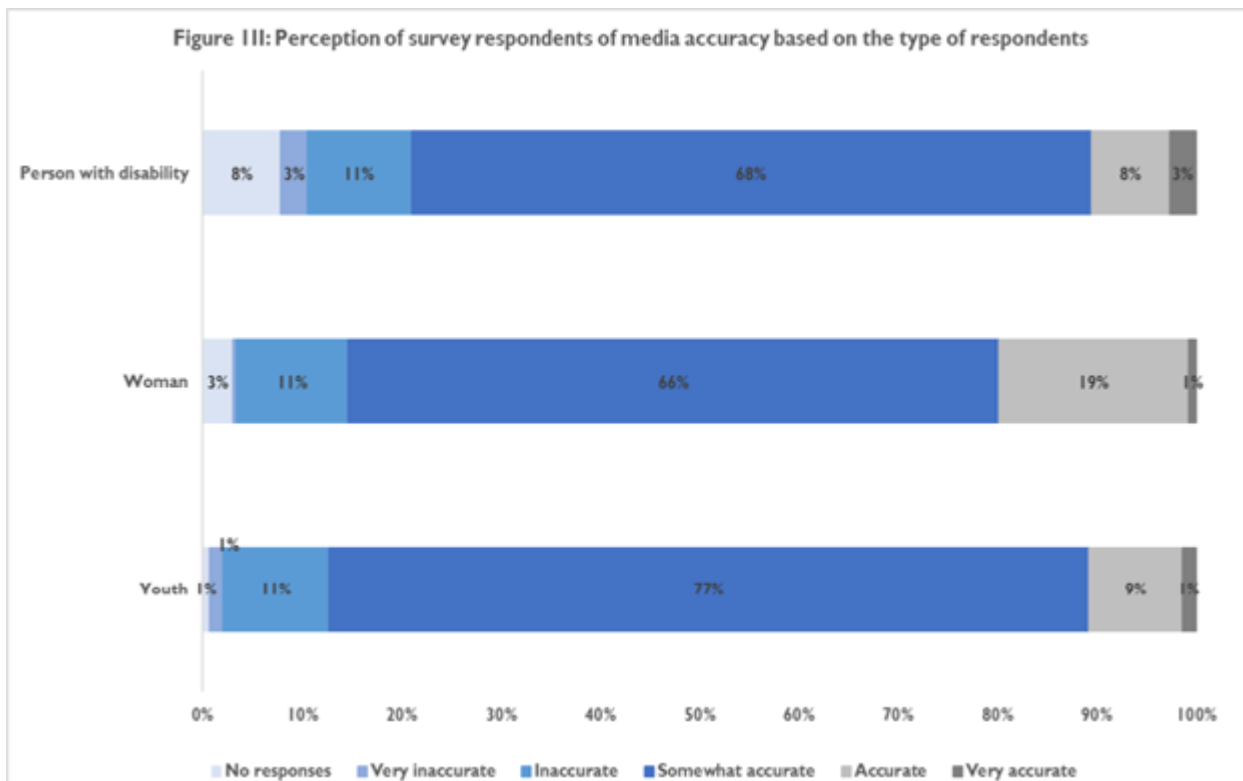
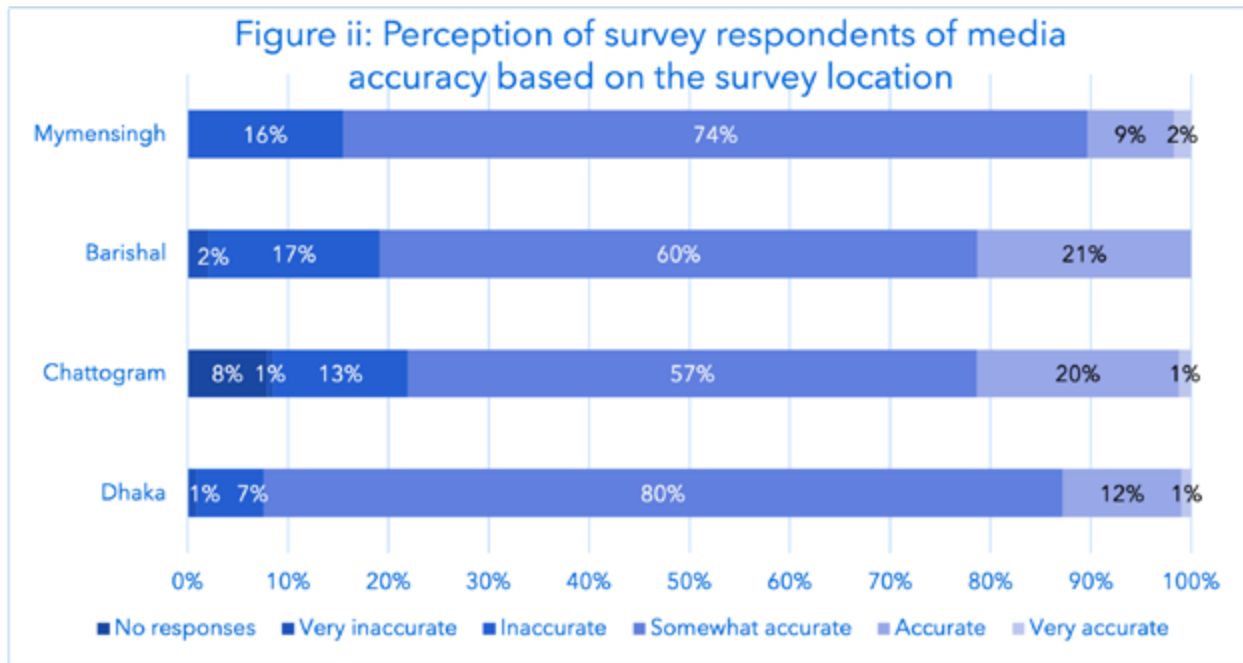
Media Accuracy

These findings from the relevant literature review can be substantiated from the present Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) conducted with a sample of 480 respondents covering four divisions (Dhaka, Chattogram, Mymensingh, and Barishal), which found mixed responses on media accuracy. The IEA study reveals that more than half of respondents (69%) (N=480) perceived the Bangladesh media as ‘somewhat accurate’ while about 15% viewed as ‘accurate’ (Figure i). The survey shows 11% of respondents perceived media’s stories ‘inaccurate.’ Only around 1% of respondents viewed media as ‘very accurate’ while similar percent of the responds perceived it as very inaccurate.



When disaggregated by division (Figure ii), of the 211 respondents in Dhaka, 80% viewed media as ‘somewhat accurate’ while 57% (out of 164), and 60% (out of 47) of respondents viewed the same in Chattogram and Barishal, respectively. In addition, out of 58 respondents in Mymensingh, 74% reported similar perception. In Barishal 17% of respondents reported that Bangladesh media as ‘inaccurate’ while 16%, 13% and 7% reported in Mymensingh, Chattogram, and Dhaka, respectively. Overall, based on the survey area, even though Dhaka and Chattogram are the home of almost all the mainstream daily newspapers, TV stations and online portals that have been developed more professionally than those of the outskirts, there

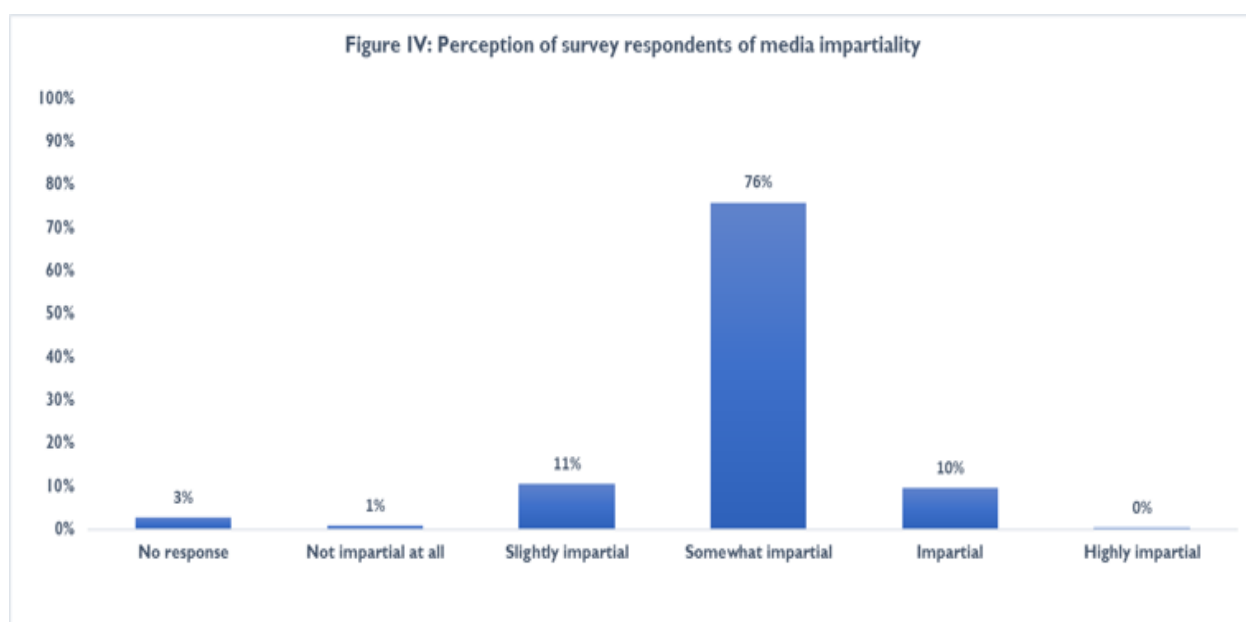
is no significant differences in the perception of respondents about the media accuracy. While there are higher percentage of respondents who said that the media is inaccurate in Barishal and Mymensingh, there are also higher percentage of people who say that the media is accurate and somewhat accurate in these divisions.



When disaggregated by type of respondents (Figure iii), from a total of 149 youth respondents, 1% and 9% stated that the news stories are very accurate and accurate respectively, while 77% reported them as 'somewhat accurate.' Of the youth respondents, 11% viewed the news stories as 'inaccurate.' Out of 293 female respondents, only 1% stated that the media stories are 'very accurate' and 19% reported as 'accurate.' 66% of the female respondents perceived that the news stories were 'somewhat accurate' while 11% of them perceived as 'inaccurate.' Out of a total of 38 physically disabled respondents, three and eight percent thought that the media stories were 'very accurate' and 'accurate' respectively while 68% perceived as 'somewhat accurate.' The remaining 11% and 3% viewed the news media as 'inaccurate' and 'very inaccurate,' respectively. Overall, based on the type of respondents, there is no significant difference in the perception of respondents about the media accuracy.

Media Impartiality

In terms of presenting the political and electoral news reports, 76% of respondents from the IEA perceived Bangladesh media as 'somewhat impartial' while 10% viewed as 'impartial.' Of the respondents, 11% stated that the media reports were 'slightly impartial' (Figure 4). When disaggregated by type of respondents (Figure 5), about 5% of youth respondents viewed the news stories as 'impartial' while 79% perceived them as 'somewhat impartial.' About 13% of youth viewed the news stories as 'slightly impartial.' For female respondents, 12% perceived the news report as 'impartial' and 10% viewed as 'not impartial at all.' Almost four-fifths (74%) viewed the new stories in Bangladesh as 'somewhat impartial.' The same proportion (8%) of the respondents with disability viewed the media stories as 'impartial' and 'not impartial at all' while 79% reported as 'somewhat impartial.' Overall, there is no significant difference in perception between youth, women, and people with disability in regard to media impartiality.



Based on the survey location (**Figure 6**), in Dhaka, 8% of the respondents reported that the news stories were ‘impartial’ and ‘slightly impartial,’ respectively, while 83% perceived as ‘somewhat impartial.’ In Chattogram, 15%, 62%, and 15% of the respondents perceived the news as ‘impartial,’ ‘somewhat impartial,’ and ‘not impartial,’ respectively. For Barishal, about four-fifths (81%) reported that news media was ‘somewhat impartial’ while 6% and 11% reported ‘impartial’ and ‘slightly impartial,’ respectively. Only 2% of respondents in Barishal perceived the media as ‘not impartial at all.’ Most respondents (83%) from Mymensingh reported that news media in Bangladesh was ‘somewhat impartial,’ while 5% and 10% reported as ‘impartial’ and ‘slightly impartial,’ respectively. Only 2% of respondents in Meymensingh perceived the media as ‘not impartial at all.’ In general, compared to the other division, the respondents in Chattogram perceived media as less impartial.

News media in Bangladesh, according to 68% respondents, didn’t provide the political leaders/electoral candidates with equal coverage. Only one in 10 respondents thought that the news media covered different political leaders equally. However, one in five respondents opined that they didn’t know/were not sure’ of the matter. Regarding the reasons behind this disparity, news media not giving equal importance to the candidates of different political parties, around 72% of respondents each reported pressuring from vested interest groups and political affiliation of the news media as one of the main reasons. Apprehension of losing revenues was also reported as another reason by 20% of respondents. Several other reasons were also mentioned by the respondents, such as: pressure from corporate interests, pressure from local administration and apprehension of being harassed by the political activists, and apprehension of being sued (**Table viii**).

Table viii. Main reasons why news media does not give equal importance to the candidates of different political parties (multiple responses)

Answer	Responses Number	Percent of Cases (n= 327)
Political affiliation of the news media	236	72.2%
Pressure from vested interest groups	237	72.5%
Apprehension of losing revenues	66	20.2%
Others	20	6.1%
Total	559	

The aforesaid findings can further be substantiated with the findings emerged from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted as part of the IEA.

Most of the FGD participants mentioned that the reports and stories of Bangladesh news media on politics and elections were biased. According to them, news media show partisanship towards their affiliated political party, ideology and beliefs since the media owners have their own political identity. The FGD participants (Journalists) in Mymensingh stated, “Some local political leaders’ tame journalists who function like their cadres.”

The pattern of media ownership and management in Bangladesh has significantly converted to private management and almost all the influential media outlets are owned and managed by different corporates. All the TV channels except four state-run are owned and managed by the corporate houses having perceived politically affiliated and bias that facilitated them to avail license during two different political governments coming to the state power since 1991 to date. For example, Beximco group, one of the leading business houses owns the news-based channel ‘Independent TV’ while Bashundhara group possess ‘News24.’ Like the satellite TV channels, the leading newspapers and the FM radio stations are also owned by the corporates, for example, Transcom Group, whose major business interventions include electronics, food and beverage, own the most popular Bangla and English dailies the ‘Prothom Alo’ and the ‘Daily Star’ besides ‘ABC’ radio. Similarly, the Hameem Group whose major business lines include textile and clothing own one of the leading new generations daily newspapers, ‘Samakal’ and news based ‘Channel24’ while another influential business group of industry the Jamuna group having business operations in textiles, chemicals, and constructions possessed one of the leading dailies ‘Jugantor’ and ‘Jamuna TV.’

The media academics and researchers believe that the corporate ownership of the media houses take a significant control over the contents. They are found less interested to cover corporate malpractices, power elite’s corruptions and they are perceived to protect the interests of the vested interest groups even adopting self-censorship.⁷⁰

A study conducted by Riaz & Rahman⁷¹ (2021) reveals how media in Bangladesh are closely linked to political parties and the ruling regime. The study (Riza & Rahman, 2021) found that 40 TV channels got approval during different regimes of Bangladesh Awami League, also the present ruling party while five such channels got approval from the tenure of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). According to the study, both the Dhaka Tribune and the Bangla Tribune are owned by 2A Media Limited — a business concern of Gemcon Group, whose vice-chairman is the Awami League lawmaker, Kazi Nabil Ahmed. Mohona TV and Duronto TV, which received licenses in 2010 and 2017 respectively, are owned by ruling party MP Kamal Ahmed Majumdar and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam. Interestingly, a significant number of people who were initially listed as the owner of the Mohona TV sold their shares

to the people close to Majumdar. In February 2010, four months after receiving the license, Belal Hossain Bhuiyan, Syed Bazlul Karim, Mohammad Iqbal Hossain and Robin Siddique sold all their shares to M Amanullah, Chairman of Aman Group and director of Mercantile Bank. Kamal Ahmed Majumder is the Chairman of the channel. His two sons Shahed Ahmed Majumder, Ziauddin Ahmed Majumder, their wife, and Awami League MP Hamida Banu, and Sajib Corporation owner MA Hashem are the directors of the channel. As for Duro TV, the channel is run by Barind Media Limited, a subsidiary of Renaissance Group owned by State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam. It is not only that the licenses are given to the supporters of the incumbents, but the existing channels' ownerships also tend to change to the hands of the people who either belong to the ruling party or are at least considered safe by them. For example, a license was issued to Sajjat Ali in 1999 for a television channel named Ten TV. After the BNP came into power in 2001, ownership changed hands. On January 30, 2003, BNP leader and a close confidant of then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia Mohammad Mosaddak Ali bought the TV Channel's license from Sajjat Ali and renamed it NTV. Former BNP leader Mushfiqur Rahman MP was awarded a license for Desh TV. Later, Awami League MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury bought most of its shares.

The FGD findings also revealed that some political leaders are operating online news portals and various digital and social media platforms run by their own supporters. The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that the one-sided news that they produce would instantly reach many people through the digital and social media platforms. Regarding the role and practice of media in Bangladesh, some FGD participants also show their concern about the lack of impartiality in the news media industry. "Where there is money, there is media," said a FGD participant in Chattogram. According to him, "Media is not free in Bangladesh," implying that the media is tied to the agenda of their funders. One of the FGD with CSO participants said, "the state-run media implements ruling party agenda while the corporate — run media looks after their business interest. So, these media are not the mass media."

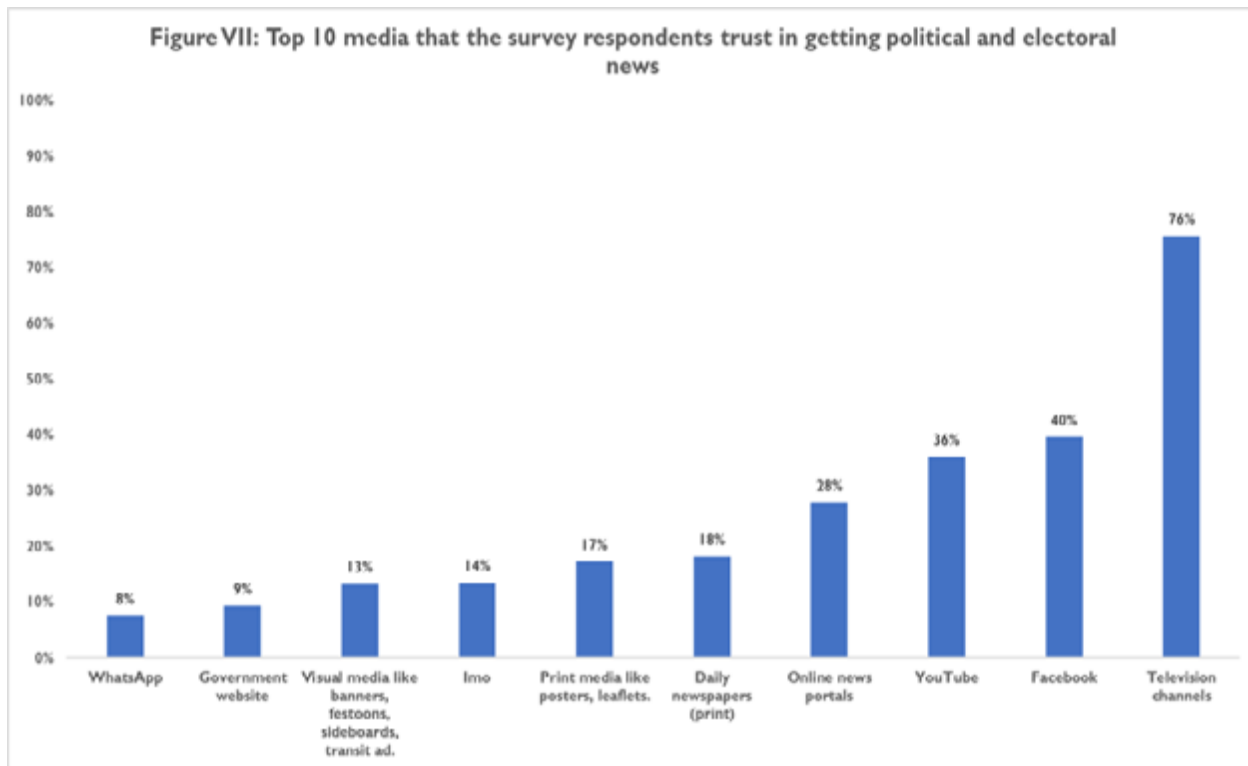
During a FGD with Marginalized people in Dhaka Division the IEA study found diverse perception about the trustworthiness of media and social media. One participant expressed "We do not get credible political and electoral news from the news media; we make our own judgement about the news being presented in the media." Another FGD participant added, "Facebook spreads more fake news than the television channels, so, we trust television channels more since some of the news channels try to cover live news and try to maintain accuracy." In a rare statement, one of the female FGD participants in Dhaka said, "Information from Facebook/ YouTube are not always correct, but the speech of the community opinion leaders is always accurate. So, we do trust the speech of the community people."

The findings from the KIIs showed, some of the mainstream news media try to maintain neutrality in covering various event-based news. But, in covering political news, media can't maintain neutrality due to political affiliation of the media owners and the journalists. The KIIs in all of the four divisions found that the political and electoral news is strongly controlled by both the ruling political party and the administration. With many media being associated or owned by the ruling party, it is easy for the ruling party to impose certain measures that prohibit the media to publish news that go against their vested interests or their malpractices like illegal business, political or business lobbying and other corrupt practices.

As mentioned earlier, two big political parties i.e., Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) directly owned/affiliated with media. Additionally, a few other major political parties i.e., Jatiya Party (Manju) had also affiliated with one of the leading dailies of the country '*The Daily Ittefaq.*' Manju served as the editor and publisher of *The Daily Ittefaq* from 1972 to 2007. Similarly, "*Daily Naya Diganta,*" a newspaper owned by Diganta Media Corporation run by a political leader of [Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh](#) is still published while 'Diganta Television' was. However, other than the influence of the business and political parties behind the media, the KII with one of senior journalists revealed that media accuracy sometimes happened due to lack of required skills and abilities in election and political reporting.

Trust in Media

Despite having some lapses and gaps in terms of media accuracy and impartiality, the community people still trust the media at varied levels. With a view to figuring out the trusted media among the respondents of the IEA, a question 'What news media/channels do you trust in getting political and electoral news?' was asked with multiple answers allowed.⁷² The respondents' views were different with high preference towards the television having more than 75% of responses (**Figure 7**). Following this, as a single social media platform Facebook was trusted by the respondents with 40% response rate, followed by YouTube (36%). Online news portal was trusted by 28% of the respondents. The Daily newspaper was trusted by 18% of the respondents. The print media like posters, leaflets etc. was trusted by around 78% of the respondents. Imo, a single social media platform, and visual media like banners, festoons, sideboards, transit ad etc. each was trusted by more than 10% of the respondents. Government website was trusted only by around 9% of the respondents, while CSO/NGO website was trusted by 7% of the respondents. Both Tiktok and WhatsApp as a single social media platform each was trusted by at least 7% of the respondents. News magazines (print), radio, and both Twitter and Instagram, each was trusted only by around 2% of the respondents, the lowest in the list.



Television is trusted especially for its audio-visual and live coverage capability of an event or incident. As expressed by one of the youth FGD participants in Dhaka *“Television is trustworthy because it can cover any events or incidents live even from the spot where there are much more elements to believe. We can see and hear what is happening simultaneously when TV covers it live from the spot.”* The reason of trust for the newspapers is that *“the newspapers are a long-standing traditional news media having prolong experiences of journalism in the country,”* the discussants mentioned. The reasons behind the trust towards social media include that the content is produced and shared by people who are sometimes well-known. However, the findings from the FGDs with the women and marginalized groups showed that, most of the people of these categories could not use Facebook due to dearth of time, lack of smart phones and operational skills. They sometimes used Facebook or experienced Facebook content via their other youth family members, relatives and the community people. Many respondents of these categories also mentioned that they could not differentiate between the credible and non-credible social media content.

EQ I.2.2.2: What are the challenges and opportunities to improve media accuracy and impartiality on the election process?

Challenges

The FGD findings revealed some of the pragmatic challenges and opportunities to improve

media accuracy and impartiality in the election process. According to them, the biggest challenge is that for 15 years the country is undergoing political dominance by one party because other political parties rarely got facilitation to be institutionalized. Furthermore, the ruling political party doesn't embrace a congenial context for media freedom. Thus, without actual opposition and media freedom to realize the check-and-balances system, which is the backbone of democracy, it is challenging for democracy in Bangladesh to fully develop into its mature form. Moreover, the KIIs opined that the political affiliation of the media owners and the journalists function as a big barrier to report political and electoral issues and affairs impartially. Although some of the mainstream news media have editorial policies to follow, they are like 'eyewash' as per views of the FGD and KII respondents. *"Every media house is owned by a powerful person or a corporate. This means that the media policy is developed by the powerful classes with political affiliation to the big political parties. Therefore, their policies will reflect the vested interest of the business and the political parties that own these media. Unsurprisingly, these corporate media will show partisanship towards their collaborators, isn't it a common practice?"* said one of the CSO FGD participants in Chottagram. However, it is mentionable that the local news media in general have no written editorial policy.

The FGDs and KII with the journalists also reveal that they faced pressures from various quarters like the vested interest groups, advertising agencies, corporates, some government agencies, local administration and the power elites. These pressures are the major challenges faced by journalists to be independent and impartial in their reporting. The KII in Dhaka viewed, *"The media in Bangladesh are passing through a tough time. They are not playing proper journalism role in real sense. Journalists should not be partisan. In reality, the journalists actually support political parties and sometimes involve in politics themselves. This is fine but they have to be responsible. They must either remain impartial in their reporting or discharge their professional duties. Additionally, the owners are using media for their own purpose."*

Another challenge to media accuracy and impartiality is the risk of being sued under DSA if they produce any coverage that goes against the government authorities, political leaders and the vested interest groups. This threat to legal action also often accompanied by physical and mental harassment, as expressed by one of the participants of FGD with CSOs in Chattogram state, *"Politics is sick in Bangladesh. Being a social worker, I face impediments. When I intend to talk independently, I face barriers from the government administration and the local politicians."* In Mymensingh, the FGD with local journalists, the participants in general mention, *"We are supported by the local administration only if we favor them. When we want to report on the real facts and figures, skirmishes are generated, and we are given pressure not to cover such issues that can go against the interest of the local political leaders or the administration."*

According to the FGD and KII findings, media accuracy also depends on the journalist's skills and abilities to cover an issue or affair properly. The FGD findings derived from the category of local journalists showed that almost all of them have no mentionable training on covering politics and election though it is a distinct 'news beat' which requires some specialized knowledge and skills on different phases and formalities of election. The FGD participants in general stated that the reporters are provided with a mere brief on what to cover and how to gather information from the seniors/media houses before going to cover an election story. The FGD findings derived from the local journalists also showed that their media houses barely equip them with necessary trainings, workshops, guidelines and logistic supports.

Regarding dealing with mis-/disinformation that affect the accuracy of the media coverage, the journalists participating in the FGDs state that to verify information they would do field visits and ask relevant people and authorities to explore the truth. They have no understanding of using modern technologies like relevant software or apps for fact-checking. Of the FGD participant journalists in Dhaka, a few had little experience of using software and apps i.e., Reverse Image Search (TinEye), Factcheck.org, InVID in their universities or in the media houses to scan/identify rumor. This lack of skills is clearly not on-par with the spread of mis/dis-information in the social media, as expressed by one of the FGD participants, *"There are good and bad sides of technology. Society is in trouble as the users of social media, especially Facebook, are spreading rumors frequently. On the other hand, we are not equipped with the necessary skills to quickly verify the news. To justify the accuracy of information, we have to count on our journalistic instinct, that we have developed over time through experiences and journalism exposures. We have to talk to different sources to verify accuracy of information."* Without being equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to use appropriate software and technology, it is clearly challenging for journalists to catch-up with the spread of the mis/dis-information in the digital world and improve the accuracy of their coverage.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, the interactions between FGD and KII participants also revealed some opportunities. According to the KIIs, many young people are undertaking jobs in the media houses who have good knowledge in modern ICTs. Their capacity can be easily enhanced through training on fact checking since they have a positive mindset of using technologies. According to a KII, the senior people have some sort of technophobia in the country for not being habituated with the recent social and digital media expansion, but the youth are very much comfortable to this transformation since they are habituated with the use of smartphones from their early life.

The ever-growing digital and social media and the use of smartphones in Bangladesh is like a double-edged sword. While, as expressed by one of the FGD participants, the easy access to smartphones has created menace, digital technology and social media can also be utilized for dissemination of accurate information to the masses through fair dealings. There are some popular folk Media in various regions, for example, *Gambhira* is a very interactive form of disseminating information on various social issues originated from the Rajshahi region. *Jaree*, a performance-based group song, is very popular in Mymensingh region. These folk media can be used for making youth better understand how to vote for the first time and making the women and the people with disabilities to be more aware of their political rights, particularly the voting rights. The youth can be the wheeling forces who can be trained to prepare suitable content for the media. Moreover, the literacy rate in Bangladesh is augmenting (at present 74.66%)⁷³ which will be a facilitating tool for the media literacy.

Lastly, even though the KII and FGD participants expressed that almost all the media are not independent, and they are affiliated with the political beliefs and ideologies, some news-based TV channels are still perceived to be moderately independent and professional despite their political affiliation. For example, Somoy TV, Jamuna Television, Independent Television, Channel 24, DBC. Similarly, among the newspapers, the Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, The New Age are perceived to be moderately professional than other dailies. These media could be trained aiming at improving the accuracy and impartiality of their reporting on election process.

EQ 2.1.3.I: To what extent has civil society been engaged in countering disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?

In Bangladesh, only a handful CSOs are found moderately visible in working to combat disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech directly. The issue is a new concept in Bangladesh which emerged gradually due to the mushroom growth of the digital and social media platforms.

According to the findings from the key informant interviews with the CSO representatives, only a few civil society organizations are moderately visible in Bangladesh and work on media literacy. The findings from KII also revealed that the Civil Society around dealing with disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech has not grown significantly in Bangladesh yet. Only a handful of organizations are trying to work on these emerging issues. These CSOs include SACMID (South Asia Center for Media in Development), VOICE (Voices for interactive choice and empowerment), Article 19, MOVE Foundation, youth-led non-profit organization; MRDI (Management and Resources Development Initiative) and Institute for Environment and Development (IED).

The 'VOICE' has a program, 'Counter Hate Speech and Misinformation' that fosters young participants including journalists, social & cultural activists, women, indigenous and minority activists, artists, filmmakers, photographers, bloggers, writers & university students through facilitating capacity and knowledge development to counter hate speech and misinformation and promote responsible use of digital space.⁷⁴ It has also implemented a project on COVID 19 Communication Crisis and Misinformation. The IED has been implementing a project 'Strengthening traditional civil society (TCS) to combat digital disinformation in Bangladesh.' They are planning to arrange capacity building workshops and trainings for the civil society members and the youth so that they can identify malicious digital content and undertake steps to counter them. The activities are aimed at facilitating civil society members and youth to identify ideological standpoints and other intentions of the suspicious social media contents and to learn the process to make a positive story which encourage tolerance, harmony, fraternity, gender sensitivity, and non-violence becoming viral online. MRDI, having wide experiences of working with community journalists, is now implementing a project '[Promoting Fact Checking to Counter Misinformation in Bangladesh](#)' in which a few specific activities are being carried out. The activities include training of content development, training of trainers (ToT) on fact-checking for journalists'/youth groups/journalism teachers and training for peer educator journalists'/youth groups/journalism teachers. These organizations sometimes arrange some sort of training and workshop on media literacy. Article 19 has launched an online course in the area of media literacy. Article 19 demanded a national Plan of Action to counter hate speech on June 17, 2022.⁷⁵ The 'Move Foundation' campaigns for countering mis-/disinformation and hate speeches through arranging different programs like the seminar on 'Fighting infodemic and extremism.'

EQ 2.1.3.2: To what extent is civil society equipped to counter disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?

According to the KIs with the CSO representatives, awareness of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech is still a new and emerging phenomenon to most of the civil society of Bangladesh. The phenomenon, however, has grown exponentially alongside the growth of the digital and social media platforms and the use of smartphones. One of the CSO key informants termed the smartphones as 'hand grenades' that are used for spreading mis-/disinformation and hate speech. Despite the phenomenon, the CSOs participants in Dhaka agreed that CSOs in Bangladesh are yet to be ready to counter these issues in terms of the abilities, skills and resources. Furthermore, the CSOs who are moderately active in this field are suffering from both the financial resources and knowledge-based contents/materials., the CSOs working in this area have limited expertise to produce effective contents to combat this phenomenon. The Civil society in Bangladesh is barely equipped to counter disinformation, misinformation,

and hate speech. They significantly lack the knowledge and skills that are needed to counter mis-/dis-information and hate speech. For example, there are rare training modules/ manuals and publicity materials, especially campaign contents in countering mis-/disinformation and hate speech. Additionally, the CSOs also do not have enough financial resources to tackle the phenomenon. The CSOs operating from Dhaka mostly depend on the donor's project-based financial support. After completion of a project they usually face financial difficulties, declining human resources and edging maintenance costs. CSOs outside Dhaka, for example Jonouddog (people's initiative), which is run by local people, mostly depend on donations from benevolent persons or local organizations/business.

EQ 2.1.3.3: What are the opportunities and challenges to strengthening the capacity of civil society to counter disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech?

Challenges

Other than the lack of financial resources and technical know-hows of the tools and techniques of countering mis-/disinformation and hate speeches that have been discussed above, CSOs also face some subtle challenges such as local political context⁷⁶ and government surveillances. NGOs/CSOs depend on government's support, meaning positive attitude, participation in projects, cooperation and approval⁷⁷ for working on this issue especially for working with the wider stakeholders like the media people, local government and administrations. For example, the local level administrators generally refuse to attend any programs of awareness where there is no proper approval from the authority. There are opportunities to work on media literacy with wider stakeholders i.e., the youth leaders, CSOs at the grassroots level, engaging experts and academia. However, the challenges include the limitations of financial resources, devices like computers and cameras, skills to plan and produce suitable contents for different types of media on proper use of social and digital media. They need both the theoretical understanding and the technical skills of audio-visual content production, manual and module development on mis-/disinformation and hate speech and carrying out the formative study. The KIIs with the CSO/NGO representatives also revealed that their staff have limited knowledge and skills on gender equality and social inclusion to be able to apply gender inclusive lenses in their coverage.

Opportunities

There are many NGOs and CSOs, for example, Proshika, BRAC, ASA, Jaago Foundation, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Bangladesh Jatiya Protibondhi Kalyan Foundation, Consumers Association of Bangladesh, SACMID, VOICE, MOVE Foundation, youth-led non-profit organization; Article 19, MRDI, Institute for Environment and Development (IED), Jonouddog (people's

initiatives) etc. who have gained significant experiences of awareness building on diverse socio-economic issues. These enriched experiences can be easily mobilized to work in this very relevant field of countering mis-/disinformation and hate speech.

Furthermore, the CSOs also expressed the needs and interest to participate in combating mis/disinformation and hate speech. The CSOs representatives are concerned that rumors which are spread through the media sometimes create anarchic situation causing communal disharmony and a huge casualty. During the data collection, representatives from Proshika, Consumers Association of Bangladesh, Article 19, Jonouddog, SACMID, VOICE whom the research team has interacted with have showed interests to undergo capacity building activities like training, workshops and ToT on the tools and techniques of combating mis-/disinformation and hate speeches. They also intend to master the skills of fair content production for raising awareness on mis/dis-information and hate speech and on how to counter the phenomenon.

Endnotes

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- 3 In this study, the youth include the population belonging to the age group of 18-29.
- 4 Some of the respondents still use button phones while many have kept these phone sets that they used earlier to shift to the smartphone. Many village women are still comfortable with button (or feature) phones.
- 5 Road infrastructure especially in the rural and hilly areas of Bangladesh is considered a barrier to access to news media, for example, printed versions of newspapers rarely reach there. In some places, people need to go to the nearest Bazar, or local administration office to access information.
- 6 Interpersonal communication fundamentally denotes an exchange of message, views, ideas, and information between two or more people mostly in the presence of the source and receiver.
- 7 Misinformation: Information that is false, but not intentional and deliberate and person disseminating believes it is true. Disinformation: Information that is false, but intentional and deliberate and person disseminating believes it is true.
- 8 An ability to access, understand and evaluate media messages and act upon the same.
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- 50 For availing foreign funds, the NGOs and CSOs have to take permission and clearance from the NGO Bureau which screens and monitors their activities closely. Sometimes, NGO bureau delay or disapprove activities of those NGOs and CSOs who are not in good book of the government and the power elites. Even in the local level, arranging any gathering or public programmes needs some sorts of approvals and permission from the authority.
- 51 May be for quarterly or bi-yearly.
- 52 Detailed list is given at the end of the report.
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- 56 Total population calculated as 72,739,548 [Women 49,773,981 + People with disability 12,54,177 + Youth 21,711,390 (est. from total population in four divisions) = 72,739,548].
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