

Policy Presentation on “DIU 2023 Declaration: Advancing Local and Regional Media for a Sustainable Future”

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Introduction

The role of local mass media in Bangladesh stands as a cornerstone in shaping societal discourse, fostering democratic values, and upholding community cohesion. However, the landscape of regional media is undergoing a seismic shift, grappling with economic challenges exacerbated by digital disruption and the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst closures of local newspapers and a decline in journalistic standards, there emerges a critical imperative to fortify the economic sustainability of regional media outlets. The confluence of economic stability and journalistic integrity not only ensures access to diverse and reliable information but also underpins the very fabric of democracy. In response to this pressing need, this policy sets forth comprehensive recommendations aimed at bolstering the economic resilience of local and regional mass media in Bangladesh.

Background

The local mass media in Bangladesh plays a crucial role in various aspects of society including politics, culture, social issues, and economics. Local, regional, and community media contribute to social cohesion and democracy by building trust, delivering relevant stories to local communities, and holding politicians accountable. However, these pillars of local information and public engagement are currently facing a significant challenge - the pursuit of economic sustainability. Changing news consumption habits and declining revenues are putting pressure on their business models, potentially limiting citizens' access to reliable and diverse information in certain areas.

Despite their historical significance and contributions, local and regional mass media organizations in Bangladesh are now in a period of transition. The immense impact of digital platforms and social media has dramatically altered the country's media landscape, reshaping the traditional characteristics of these outlets that have been in place for decades. The economic challenges faced by local media outlets have been exacerbated by the dual forces of the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting consumer preferences. A 2020 study conducted by the Bangladesh Independent Journalist Network (BIJN) revealed that over 60% of the 456 local daily and weekly newspapers in six districts, including Dhaka, have closed down due to the pandemic. Many local journalists have left

the profession due to the economic crisis, leading to a decline in both access to news and the publication of transparent information at the local level (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). The future of regional newspapers is uncertain as advertising revenue shrinks and they face stiff competition from tech giants. Numerous outlets shut their doors during the pandemic, presenting countless challenges to regional journalism in Bangladesh and contributing to its ongoing struggle.

Economic constraints are a major concern for local news media. Many media organizations grapple with financial difficulties, impacting their ability to invest in quality journalism, meet monthly salary obligations, and conduct research and investigative reporting. Financial instability plagues these local and regional media entities, preventing them from competing effectively despite their desire to practice objective journalism for their communities. This has resulted in a decline in overall professional journalistic and ethical standards at the regional level, pushing journalists towards sensationalism to attract audiences.

Now is a crucial moment to take the necessary steps to secure the future of local news organizations by prioritizing the economic sustainability of regional mass media. This, undoubtedly, can lead to a healthy democracy and an informed citizenry. Any public funds granted to private media entities must benefit the community, and thus any rural and regional newspapers receiving government funding will require monitoring. With the “DIU Declaration 2023” policy framework in place, we can support these outlets to ensure they are producing quality, local, public-interest journalism that accurately represents their diverse communities. It is imperative to ensure the economic sustainability of local and regional media in Bangladesh.

Methodology:

The recommendations were derived from ten Focus Group Discussions involving seven group members each. The participants included academics, senior journalists, editors, and newspaper owners from various local and regional backgrounds. Each group possessed a deep understanding of the issue, having been thoroughly introduced to the topic. They were then given an hour to brainstorm among themselves, followed by the preparation of individual suggestion presentations for their respective groups.

The data was analyzed using the inductive method of thematic analysis. The suggestions were integrated into the main recommendations from the different groups, with points added where new ideas emerged. Many of the recommendations were consolidated from various groups, as they shared common principles.

These changes aim to enhance the clarity and readability of the passage while maintaining the original meaning and intent.

Recommendations for the Government:

- i) Declaration Policy: An independent commission should be set up composed of senior journalists and educators who will advise the Deputy Commissioners to approve the certification of local and regional newspapers.
- ii) Recruiting Policy: A bare minimum educational qualification should be determined by the government for practicing journalists in local and regional mass media.
- iii) Amendment in Advertising Policy: The 50-50 policy for government advertisements should be implemented at the grass-roots level so that the money can be divided equally.
- iv) Preventing corruption regarding supplements: The government should conduct a proper investigation to prevent corruption regarding supplement advertisements.
- v) Rate increase of the Advertisement: The government should increase the advertisement rate so that economic parity can be achieved by the local and regional mass media.
- vi) Subsidy for Newsprint: More subsidies should be provided to the tools of newsprint so that the local and regional mass media can lessen their printing costs.
- vii) Incentive during Crisis: The incentives provided by the government could be a driving force for the local and regional mass media to survive in critical situations such as natural calamities or pandemics.
- viii) Bank loan with minimum interest rate: As newspaper business is considered an industry, bank loan with a low interest rate could boost any regional media to thrive in the long run.
- ix) Support for Digital Transformation: As nowadays digital platforms have become a source of review for most of the national media, local and regional media can follow in the same footsteps too. The government could provide the necessary monetary and technical support to make this digital transformation smoother for local and regional newspapers.

x) Government-facilitated Training: Journalists' training facilitated by the government could play a crucial role in developing the skill set of the local journalists, which will pave the way for economic sustainability in the long run.

xi) Monitorship: Wage-board monitorship and circulation monitorship should be implemented in order to make the local and regional mass media more accountable in the eyes of the government.

Recommendations for the Management:

i) Highlighting local issues: The management should prioritize local issues to be published in local news media rather than placing more emphasis on national issues.

ii) Readership research: An independent readership research should be conducted by the management to determine the pulse of their target audience.

iii) In-house training: These kinds of training organized by the management would help its employees excel in various fields and sharpen their skills.

iv) Collaborative approaches: The management team should involve relevant NGOs and educational institutions to assess their local media house's performance.

v) Prioritization on Digital Transformation: The management should put emphasis on transforming their local and regional media's contents into digital spectrum to generate additional sources of revenue.

vi) Regular salary of employees: The management should focus on ensuring the regular salary policy of their house during each cycle and assess the process independently.

Abstract

The economic viability of local and regional mass media in Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, besieged by the dual onslaught of shifting consumer behaviors and financial instability exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, this study presents a meticulously curated set of recommendations derived from ten Focus Group Discussions involving key stakeholders within the media landscape. Anchored in the principles of transparency, accountability, and community engagement, these recommendations span governmental interventions and management strategies aimed at safeguarding the economic sustainability of local media entities. Presented as a Policy Presentation on “DIU 2023 Declaration: Advancing Local and Regional Media for a Sustainable

Future,” the roadmap outlined herein seeks to fortify the foundations of local journalism and foster a vibrant ecosystem of information dissemination. From the establishment of an independent commission to oversee certification processes to incentives for digital transformation and government-facilitated training programs, the implementation of these recommendations holds the promise of a resilient, inclusive, and thriving local media landscape, vital for the sustenance of democratic ideals and informed citizenry as envisioned in the “DIU 2023 Declaration”.