Developmental Issues in News Media: NGO-Media Interaction in Bangladesh

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This article examines factors influencing news coverage of developmental issue in the context of NGO-media interaction in Bangladesh, by employing qualitative interview and thematic analysis methods. The investigation finds several influential factors: NGOs’ nature of communication with news media, the commercial orientation and agenda-setting role of media, corruption in journalistic and NGO practices, personal relationships, and journalists' lack of knowledge about development issues, which influences both the NGO-media interaction and the nature of coverage of developmental issues. Some of these factors also act to diminish the number of critical news articles about developmental activities of NGOs. To improve news coverage, the article suggests that developmental NGOs more frequently convey newsworthy ideas to the media, and that both journalists and NGO professionals pursue capacity building.

Introduction

Developmental NGOs play a major role in Bangladesh’s human development process. Media are regarded as important for developmental NGOs, as they can promote or create awareness about NGO activities. NGOs need media to convey their messages, and also to form public opinion about government policy. Similarly, news media have become dependent on NGOs for covering development issues. Developmental NGOs of Bangladesh are among the most active in the world, and they have been successful in helping the government to achieve targets in human resource development (UNDP, 2005). This study investigates factors concerning NGO-media interaction that influence the coverage of developmental issues in Bangladesh, a least developed country that is also a “medium human development” country (UNDP, 2005).

Knowledge transmission and enhanced transparency are regarded as key ingredients of an effective strategy by development policymakers. Promoting good governance and development requires improvement of media capacity for reporting on socioeconomic and development issues such as public health and education (Hudock, 2003; and Ojo, 2005).

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2 Least developed countries are those deemed highly disadvantaged in the development process (many of them for geographical reasons), and facing greater-than-average risks of failing to come out of poverty. There are 50 countries in this category. The UN considers low income, weak human assets, and economic vulnerability as three criteria for LDCs. Similarly, UNDP in its human development index considers a country's health, education, and income in a country. (http://www.unctad.org/Templates/Page.asp?intItemID=3618&lang=1 & UNDP, 2005)
NGO Activities in Bangladesh

Bangladesh became independent in 1971, through a bloody liberation war to escape the rule of what was then West Pakistan. Bangladesh’s struggle for economic emancipation continues; the country remains poor. Though the country has progressed in human development and agriculture compared to other least developed countries in the 36 years since independence, its development process has been fettered by political and environmental factors. Developmental NGOs have significantly contributed to the development process in Bangladesh. Since independence, the NGO sector in Bangladesh has emerged to contribute to the state’s daunting task of rebuilding a war-ravaged nation (Ahmad, 2001). Leading NGOs such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Proshika, and Grameen Bank started their activities in the early or mid-1970s (Lewis, 1993).

At the start of the 1990s, development prospects for Bangladesh were seen as slim, about the equivalent of those for sub-Saharan Africa today (UNDP, 2005:46). Even so, Bangladesh has recorded “some of the developing world’s most rapid advances” in basic human development indicators since the mid-1990s. According to the World Human Development Report 2005, the successes of Bangladesh demonstrate what can be achieved through stronger state action and civic activism. Apart from progress in infant mortality, fertility, and nutrition, primary school enrollment rates now exceed 90%, up from 72% in 1990, and enrollment in secondary education has been rising too (UNDP, 2005). NGOs’ success in poverty alleviation and development initiatives is often undermined, though, by political misuse of government policy regarding NGO sector (“EU to urge govt again to release fund allocated for Proshika,” 2004).

In order to support social and economic empowerment of the poor, NGOs in Bangladesh have vastly widened their activities to include group formation, micro-credit, formal and informal education, training, health and nutrition, family planning and welfare, agriculture and related activities, water supply and sanitation, human rights and advocacy, and legal aid. Some NGOs have succeeded in providing services such as education, health, and microfinance and in promoting human rights, particularly women's rights (Rafi & Chowdhury, 2000; Shehabuddin, 1999). NGOs’ activities in the sector of human resource development have contributed significantly to national achievement. But in areas such as poverty, quality education, women's rights, and human rights, NGOs need media support to inform and mobilize people. Distance and lack of interaction between media and NGOs over these issues stand in the way of implementing these development initiatives.

Development Journalism

Though the concept and practice of development journalism is a subject of debate, some have tried to redefine it. Encouraged by the UNESCO’s much-talked-about New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the late 1970s, developing countries saw development journalism as a means for promoting economic development (Moemeka, 2000). In practice, though, the concept was used to pursue political objectives, with governments trying to harness the media in the name of nation building and economic development (Radio Australia, 2001).

Those who are now redefining development journalism do not mean only to expose problems. They do not view development journalism as limited to particular development topics. Some argue that this type of news reporting needs a solution-oriented approach with more follow-up stories (Uttamchandani, 2005). One media critic notes that as politics, social failures, crimes, and executives dominate mainstream news, the media have “no positive thinking and make no efforts to give the society a new direction.” Journalism committed to development needs to look at the situation in a broader context.
In the view of Namra (2004), it should focus on “the needs of the poor, the deprived, and the marginalized, and should emphasize their effective participation in development planning.”

Development journalism is more pertinent in the context of NGO-media relations. NGOs can use media both to teach – to inform the public about their activities – and to learn (Hudock, 2005; Fleury, 2004 & Gregoire, 2005). In this case, the agenda-setting process is important as well as challenging. Quoting a study on agenda-setting by Dearing and Rogers, Wallack et al. (1999, p. 4) observe, “The agenda-setting process is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites.”

**Media in Bangladesh**

Media have played crucial roles in Bangladesh, including by in revealing development concerns to guide policymakers. The issue of arsenic contamination in Bangladesh was first picked up by print media in the mid-1990s. News coverage drove both the national government and the international community to pay attention to the issue. In Bangladesh, media support NGO initiatives to strengthen human rights and to campaign against gender discrimination, repression of women, and religious extremism. The media have made the people of Bangladesh more aware of their fundamental human rights and constitutional protections than in the past (Anam, 2002). However, the practice of journalism in Bangladesh is not free from "envelope journalism." Referring to a global assessment of bribery in the newspaper industry by Kruckberg and Testura in 2003, Heath & Combs (2006) cite Bangladesh as one of the countries where such bribery is “most common”; essentially, news coverage is sometimes for sale (Kruckberg & Testura, 2003:477).

Because of the level of adult literacy (43.1%) and the limited purchasing power of a large section of the population, newspapers circulate among a relatively small portion of the total population. Some argue that journalism has not yet become relevant to the real needs of ordinary people. Most newspaper readers live in cities, so rural issues are addressed only peripherally (Anam, 2002). Overall, television viewers are increasing, but newspaper readers and radio listeners are declining. From 2002 to 2005, the number of TV viewers increased from 61% to 64%, while newspaper readers dropped from 26% to 24% and radio listeners from 29% to 22% (Hasan, 2005). Despite these trends, newspapers are likelier than electronic media to undertake critical and politically challenging in-depth reporting, and they reach opinion leaders (Roy, 2005).

This article considers NGOs’ interaction with mainstream newspapers and private television channels in Bangladesh. Political and economic factors associated with media operation can significantly influence the NGO-media interaction.

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3 Agenda-setting describes a powerful influence of the media: the ability to tell the audience what issues are important. Agenda-setting helps to form public awareness and a concern for salient issues. Media concentration on few subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

4 A highly toxic carcinogen, arsenic has affected people in the Bengal Basin. Arsenic naturally exists in the earth. Tube wells installed without scientific investigation caused arsenic to dissolve into drinking water (http://www.nvo.com/ghosh_research/arseniccontaminationinthebengalbasin1/).
NGO-Media Relations: A Review

There is a notion that the NGO-media relationship is often cozy because media in general are on the side of many NGOs (O’Sullivan, 2003). Some view media relations as the center of the practice of public relations (Taylor, 2000). Media not only can expose the efforts of NGOs, but also can enhance the legitimacy. So the relation of an NGO or any organization with the media needs to be ongoing on the basis of information, while also recognizing the need of news media (Hopkins, 2003). Consequently, many consider as an essential element of media relations the development of personal relationships with reporters and “the information gatekeepers” – editors and producers (Malan, 2005). NGOs depend on media coverage because it can increase the public’s awareness about an organization, lead to a better understanding of the group’s mission, and help gain public support for its activities (International Code Council, 2005).

People often get the bulk of their new information from the news media, so any organization seeking public attention and support needs the media. In this context, the most important task for an organization is to find newsworthy information and to present it to journalists accurately and usefully (“Helping the news media cover family planning,” 1995). Such factors help organizations to develop a credible relationship with media. In contrast, attempts to "manage" news media – for example, by withholding information or issuing self-promotional half-truths – undermine the organization’s credibility (“Helping the news media cover family planning,” 1995).

Referring to a study on non-profit organizations’ media relations by Rouner and Camden, Taylor (2000:6) mentions that not-for-profit NGOs “lack the expertise and sophistication” in media relations efforts. Similarly, journalists’ low level of professionalism often constrains the relationship between NGOs and media (Report: NGO Needs Assessment, 2002). On the other hand, training, personal experiences, social systems, and objectives of journalists influence the selection and processing of information (Taylor, 2000).

In discussing the NGO-media relationship, it is important to consider what interests news media. Many say that tension and conflict interest media, and that media like numbers and lists. In this context, formatting messages to gain media attention is an important consideration (Weidman, 2003). Because media are market-driven, they are concerned about audience interest to sell their stories or programs. NGOs perceive news media as preferring negative stories (Malan, 2005; Schenkler & Herrling, 2004). When providing content and information, NGOs need to consider not only the interests of journalists but also those of their audience (Diouf, 2001).

Media have a stronger influence on economic and political outcomes when they work with other institutions, such as NGOs. Media in Bangladesh have supported NGOs in strengthening human rights and campaigning against gender discrimination, religious extremism, and violence against women (Anam, 2002). Consequently, a regional workshop on gender and disasters in Pakistan in 1996 emphasized the need for NGOs to develop interactive partnerships with media and bridge the difference in perception between the two (Duryog Nivaran, 1996). At the same time, some development organizations maintain a patronizing attitude towards journalists and think that they can tell journalists how to cover a story (West, 2005).

In a study on NGO-media interaction, Malan (2005) found that local NGOs in South Africa assist journalists in gaining information about HIV/AIDS. Earlier, though, those NGOs had to convince reporters of the importance of the issue. On the other hand, Kenyan NGOs rarely interact with media and so failed to communicate adequately with the public on HIV/AIDS issues (Malan, 2005). NGOs that successfully network with media invest considerable time and effort in making things easier and more understandable.
for journalists. In short, an NGO's relationship with media mostly lies in its ability to ensure journalists’ access to reliable information (Malan, 2005). Reporters want organizations to be “open” and “committed to being the first and best source of information” (Heath & Combs, 2006).

Media advocacy is important for developmental NGOs because they are generally eager to spur community involvement in social change or development. Given the media’s important role in shaping public opinion and awareness, advocates of any development program must rely on the media to disseminate their messages (Rubin, 2000). Media advocacy is the term for the strategic use of mass media to advance social or public policy initiatives. It uses a range of media and other advocacy strategies to define the problem and stimulate broad-based coverage (Wallack, 2000:422).

This study asks a broader question: What factors in NGO-media interaction affect news coverage of developmental issues? The focus is on challenges, weaknesses, and opportunities in NGO-media interactions, as well as perceptions of journalists and NGO professionals about each other.

Method

The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze factors associated with coverage of developmental issues in Bangladeshi news media. Qualitative interviews provide an in-depth analysis of existing NGO-media interaction as well as a comparative analysis, while a thematic analysis with quantitative interpretation examines the news stories about a large developmental NGO in Bangladesh. Coverage of the NGO Proshika's poverty alleviation programs is analyzed for two Bangla-language and two English-language national dailies between January 2003 and July 2006. The thematic analysis identifies the nature of news coverage of Proshika and its programs.

The qualitative interviews with journalists and NGO staff members were semi-structured, with the researcher asking several fixed open-ended questions (Appendix III). Journalists interviewed include both editors and reporters from mainstream newspapers, news agencies, and television channels. From NGOs, two officials of Proshika's Policy Communication and Advocacy and Information and Documentation departments were interviewed using a similar format. The researcher also interviewed officials responsible for external relations and communication activities of CARE Bangladesh and Karmajibi Nari (KN), for representation from three different types of NGOs – a large national organization, an international one, and an issue-focused rights-based one. Proshika is considered one of the largest national NGOs in Bangladesh, with about three million group members and over 11 million beneficiaries; it conducts activities in 57 of the country's 64 districts (www.proshika.org). CARE International, of course, is an international NGO (CARE Bangladesh, 2005). Karmajibi Nari (KN), finally, is relatively small in terms of program focus and target audience, and it is completely rights-based (Karmajibi Nari, 2005).

The researcher interviewed four news reporters covering developmental or economic NGO issues. Of them, two are from different Bangla-language national newspapers (Prothom Alo and Bhoror Kagoj), one is from English-language national newspaper (The Bangladesh Observer), and one is a former stringer for the BBC Bangla service. The researcher also interviewed four senior journalists working in gatekeeping and planning positions in news media – two from Bangla national dailies (Ittefaq and Sangbad), one from an English national daily (The Daily Star), and one from the Dhaka Courier, a Weekly News Magazine. With informed consents, the researcher conducted the interviews following the semi-structured and conversational style. At the outset, each interviewee received a written brief of the study, approved by Institutional Review Board of Ohio University, as well as an oral description of the study's purposes. Because the consent form (Appendix I) guarantees confidentiality, A, B, C, and D are the news
reporters, and E, F, G, and H are the journalists in gatekeeping positions. The two Proshika staff members are identified as X and Y, and the Care Bangladesh and KN staff members are U and V respectively.

All of the informants answered the common questions (Appendix III). However, other issues arose during some conversations and led to follow-up questions. Consequently, the interviews vary from about 25 minutes to an hour. Transcripts were prepared, some verbatim and some partial.5

The thematic analysis of news coverage represents a reality check of informants’ observations. The researcher scanned Proshika-related news stories published in four newspapers – the Daily Star and the Bangladesh Observer (English-language national dailies), and Prothom Alo and the Ittefaq (Bangla-language national dailies) – between January 2003 and July 2006, excluding March through May 2004.6 Three dominant thematic categories emerged: “news on developmental outcomes due to Proshika’s projects or initiatives,” “news on Proshika’s developmental and organizational activities,” and “news on challenges faced by Proshika.” Thematic analysis shares many principles and procedures with content analysis, but is more exploratory (Donovan-Hall, 2004). The researcher coded coverage by theme. As these data are nominal, a chi-square test was conducted to see whether the comparison among these three themes was statistically significant. The researcher also conducted a content analysis of the sources of the selected news stories, by coding on the basis of three news sources – own correspondents, press release, and news agency.

Findings

The qualitative interviews with NGO staff members and journalists suggest some key factors that influence the coverage of developmental news in Bangladesh: NGOs’ nature of communication with different audiences, the commercial orientation and agenda-setting function of media, corruption in journalistic and NGO practices, personal relationships between editors and NGO leaders, NGO officials’ knowledge of journalistic practices, and journalists’ knowledge of development issues. These factors overlap. An NGO’s nature of communication is affected by staff members’ personal relationships with journalists and their knowledge of journalism, as well as by journalists’ knowledge of developmental issues. Corruption in journalism and NGOs affects the personal relationship between journalists and NGO chiefs.

NGOs’ Nature of Communication with News Media

We normally see two types of NGO communication with news media: regular and situational. Some big NGOs with projects in different areas develop project-specific communication strategies. Regular communication encompasses two principal ways by which news media receive information from NGOs, according to one journalist informant: press releases and guided media tours. A respondent from Proshika said that they recognize the importance of mass media in disseminating information about their activities. Proshika staff X said, “Previously the scope of utilizing mass media was limited to few newspapers and one state-owned television channel. Newspapers are publishing special pages on business, economic, and development issues, and these pages are accommodating news of both commercial sector

5 There are three ways of transcribing data from qualitative interviews: (1) full, verbatim transcripts, (2) partial transcripts that omit irrelevant discussion, and (3) transcripts limited to pertinent points (Weiss, 2004).

6 From March to May, 2004, Proshika’s activities were hampered because its chief and staff members were arrested as part of government’s crackdown on the organization. This topic dominated coverage of Proshika at the time. Accordingly, the period is omitted from this study (Seabrook, 2004).
and non-profit organizations. A new beat is also developed in news reporting particularly in the area of NGOs.” CARE Bangladesh, usually known as an “infrastructure development organization,” shifted its focus to governance and social justice issues after 2000. Because the shift in approach requires generating awareness and participation in different groups of people, CARE Bangladesh, earlier known as a “media-shy” organization, worked actively with mainstream media in Bangladesh.

Like Proshika, informants from CARE Bangladesh and the NGO focused on women's labor rights, Karmajibi Nari (KN), said that they use mass media to inform not only the organization's beneficiaries and the mass public, but also the government, other stakeholders, and development partners. KN staff member V said, “You can be benefited by working with journalists. Instead of going to many people, if you talk to five journalists you can reach one million people.” Along with sending press releases by fax and messenger, these three NGOs contact journalists individually and reiterate the message, as media people do not always understand the importance. “If news management can be briefed about the importance of any program or event before, it can also be helpful in getting better coverage,” V said. Such communication is situational, employed only when NGOs need information disseminated or awareness raised.

CARE informant U said, “We had a well-planned media strategy for any project. We have separate media strategy for different projects because all projects may not need similar communication intervention. CARE has media strategies for 18 projects.” Reporter B and senior sub-editor H admitted that “NGOs have appeared as news source for media. We had to depend on NGOs for happenings like women repression and human rights violation at interior places in the country. It is true that we get many [more] news items on the happenings in rural areas than what we used to get 15, 20 years back. NGO sources are contributing more news reports.” Journalist G noted the other side of the transaction: “If media do not give coverage, NGOs will not get funding. Published news items with positive coverage can help NGOs to convince donors or policymakers about their efforts in releasing funding.”

Thematic Analysis of News Stories of Proshika

Between January 2003 and July 2006, excluding the crisis period from February to July 2004, the Daily Star, the Bangladesh Observer, the Prothom Alo, and the Ittefaq published 116 news stories on three topics: Proshika’s developmental and organizational activities, achievements of its beneficiaries, and the political or legal challenges it faced. Among the published news stories, 24 were on the positive outcome of developmental projects, 77 on organizational or developmental activities, and 14 on political and legal challenges (Appendix I). Difference among these three types of news reports is statistically significant as $p > 0.05$ as Pearson chi-square is 59.809 (Appendix I: Fig 1).

The source of news stories is important in determining the interest of media in NGO issues. Of the stories on developmental outcomes and those on political or legal challenges, stories reported by the newspapers' own staff outnumbered those based only on press releases. Of 24 stories on the developmental outcomes of projects, 21 were covered by newspapers' staff. So too with 11 of the 14 stories on political or legal challenges. By contrast, 70 of the 77 articles on organizational and developmental activities relied equally on newspaper staff and press releases. The difference between the two types of article sources – own reporter (coded 1) and press releases (coded 2) – is statistically significant as chi-square test result shows $p > 0.05$ (Appendix II: Fig 2). The difference between the two types of sources is also statistically significant (Appendix II: Fig 3) in that each of the three topics was covered in all four newspapers.

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7 A beat is an area, either topical or geographic, covered by a reporter.
These findings indicate that newspapers used press releases in covering organizational and developmental activities. In the case of news reports on issues related to developmental outcomes and government challenges, newspapers mostly used stories written by their staff and in some cases a news agency. (In news agencies, news stories are developed in a similar fashion, on the basis of either organizational press releases or staff reporting.) Most of the success stories gave the name of the NGO in the headline, which garners the most attention. As some informants mentioned, this practice promotes the organization instead of the issue. Of the 24 stories on positive outcomes of Proshika’s projects, 10 featured the organization’s name in the headline. The rest of the news stories emphasized individuals in headlines and introductory paragraphs, but mentioned Proshika in the body of the story.

**Personal Relationships**

The nature of the relationship between media management and NGO authorities influences coverage of NGO activities, according to informants from both NGOs and the news media. This relationship can include “self-censorship,” when the press ignores events that might reflect badly on the NGO. Sometimes, both NGO staff members and journalists use personal relations for exploring new stories. Thus, personal relationships have both positive and negative aspects. Two reporters mentioned that assignments to cover NGO events depend on personal relationships. “If an NGO chief is known to the newspaper editor, he or she may request to cover or publish any news item concerning that organization,” a reporter admitted. The relationship between an NGO chief and a newspaper editor, and the relationship between NGO people and journalists, particularly the gatekeepers, are decisive factors. Media people who have good relations with NGO people avoid contentious coverage of the NGO sector, though they know its flaws.

An NGO informant commented, “Personal communication and friendship with journalists are my strengths. I have over one hundred journalist friends. If I visit any media house, I can trace four or five familiar faces. I do not lose anyone’s visiting card. I may forget their face, but I maintain communication with them.” This informant also said, “I try to help journalists with ideas and tips. I even give them permission to use my analysis as their news report or under [their] name.”

**Commercial Orientation and Agenda-Setting Function of Media**

The commercial orientation of mainstream mass media, both broadcast and print, often appear as a challenge for developmental NGOs. The commercial interests of news media dictate what type of news will be presented. An NGO informant was not optimistic that private satellite television channels would air programs on developmental issues. Two state-controlled media – Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar – are run by less efficient, less qualified, and more politicized government staff. The state-owned media are not concerned about programming diversity or quality. From experience working with broadcast media, an informant from Proshika said, “Grassroots people do not have access to satellite television channels. Public media like Bangladesh Betar and BTV with higher reach are accessible to many people. Though they run commercial programs, they are conservative in terms of selecting social issues.” CARE Bangladesh staff perceives that in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, negative news dominates, driven by commercial gain.

An informant of the women workers’ organization observed, “As KN is concerned with workers’ rights, they do not often get adequate coverage from the newspapers or television channels owned by business entrepreneurs. The corporate interests of some news media appear as a challenge for them.”
Recently, one of the news stories, published in a newspaper owned by a garment owner, indirectly blamed concerned NGOs for educating garment workers about labor rights.”

Reporter C similarly said, “Some newspapers are run by an owner-editor. Most of the newspaper owners are businessmen. That is why they want to report on issues that will help them commercially. They are more concerned with negative reports of [the] government as people will like such critical reports more.” C found that except for one or two leading dailies, no newspaper campaigned on social or political issues in its pages.

Due to the commercial orientation of mainstream media in Bangladesh, NGOs must influence agenda-setting to promote developmental issues. Agenda-setting in media is achieved through the presentation and treatment of news. Besides newspaper policy, an NGO’s credibility among journalists is another important factor influencing agenda-setting of reporting about NGOs. Though Bangladesh has many “fake NGOs,” journalists informants credit some NGOs with positive changes at the community level. An informant at a national daily said, “I try to give coverage of NGO activities if I find that they have significant contribution to society. If journalists think that NGOs are doing something good, then they report those activities positively. At least, [this] newspaper does not allow any favoritism in publishing NGO’s news.” The journalist also noted, “We gave publicity to an innovative approach of a local NGO in Narail where they do not use chemical[s] to curb pests. In a northern district of the country, a local NGO has developed an innovative farming technique to help poor villagers to grow pumpkin[s] on a sandy soil. It changes people’s perception that farming can be done on sandy soil.”

When NGOs face political or social challenges to their programs, newspapers try to cover the issues. News reporter D said, “In 2000, I wrote many news reports against local fatwabaj [religious edicts] and women traffickers who were opposing the activities of a donor organization to check women trafficking. As [the] curbing-women-trafficking program of that organization affected the interest of traffickers, the latter influenced the village religious leaders to go against the activities of the organization. Media reporting during that crisis period helped that organization to get [the] administration’s support.”

Journalist A said, “It is news media that will know information for the readers or audience or people. It is important that media will act on its own way, not as a developmental organization. Previously, media only dealt with problems and solutions. But recently several newspapers brought a change in agenda-setting of news by putting positive news in its first page or highlighting success stories.”

Karmajibi Nari did not receive favorable coverage at first. But it began to get good coverage when it worked to protect the rights of working women, as most news media promote women rights. Some big NGOs in the country pursue only service-delivery goals. KN, by contrast, attracted media attention because its rights-based approach is more governance- and people-focused, which appeals to media. Similarly, CARE Bangladesh received significant media attention in promoting their developmental issues after working with news media in partnership. By doing this, they could also reach more people, especially strategic target groups, with developmental messages.

CARE got support from news media in its RVCC (Reducing Vulnerability for Climate Change) project, which deals with the salinity problem in the southern part of Bangladesh. The CARE informant said that embankments and other manmade structures proved to be causing the environmental hazards. Given that manmade causes can be resolved, they decided to try to use the media to lobby national-level policymakers. After CARE brought reporters to the area, four national newspapers made the RVCC the front-page lead story, spurring the government to take immediate steps to solve the problem.
Lack of Journalism Training and Knowledge of Development Issues

NGO informants complained that journalists, reporters and editors alike, are uninformed about developmental issues. Proshika staff member Y suggested that a lack of skills prevents news media from undertaking investigative reporting on NGO issues. Y said, “The project-based analytical report is not done by any newspaper … they only know about funding issues, not project based activities.” Journalists admitted that they lack expertise in developmental issues, as this area of reporting is still growing slowly.

CARE Bangladesh staff member U talked about two types of challenges: internal and external. Of internal challenges, U said, “Staff members working in projects of CARE Bangladesh do not have any background on development communication or the practice of media. In that case, I do need to explain them the whole process.” Even graduates of local journalism schools cannot relate their studies to development. Of external challenges, U said, “I need to give a lot of time to concerned people working in mass media to make them understand the issues that CARE is working for.”

V of Karmajibi Nari similarly noted, “I am sorry to say that most of the journalists are not well aware of both national policymaking process and global governance. For example, I will say that 98 per cent of our media people do not know the distinction between Least Developed Countries and developing countries. If you use the word ‘developing country’ in your report, then you will give a wrong idea about Bangladesh’s rights and obligations to concerned people.”

Journalist C observed that NGOs’ grassroots activities are typically covered by local correspondents, who often lack academic credentials. They tend to cover only such issues as corruption of local government, crime, and tenders for construction work. With their lack of conceptual knowledge, these local journalists do not innovatively report on developmental issues. One journalist said that the high interest charged by microfinance organizations may not receive coverage “due to a conceptual lacking of journalists to critically see the development projects.”

Corruption, access to information and censorship:

Informants have alleged that journalists are paid for reporting NGO issues. A journalist informant complained that NGOs introduced the practice and lamented that it has corrupted the profession. Some journalist informants believed that due to this image, sub-editors look at news copy on NGO issues with suspicion. The practice has also put other development organizations in a difficult situation, as they do not get a good response from news media without payment. The CARE Bangladesh informant claimed that they promote issues, not the organization and stated that “CARE does not compel or request journalists to write the name of the organization in news reports. It is left to the discretion of journalists. When CARE sends press releases to news media organizations, it wants those issues to be promoted. In that case, if CARE’s name appears, it may have. Journalists are allowed to work openly in the field and report in their own way. We only give them the normal support of travel cost and accommodation. We don’t pay them extra money.”

On the other hand, a sub-editor clarified his position about paid reporting. He said, “We can understand which news reports are paid, or which reports are biased.” Another journalist mentioned that NGOs are able to influence them most of the time when they are on a field visit. However, he believes that journalists are not totally loyal to any NGO, and therefore, they cannot be influenced.

A news reporter said that the microcredit programs of NGOs have well-documented shortcomings that include an underlying high interest rate. “When I was working for a development debate on
microcredit for BBC’s Bangla service program, Grameen Bank\(^8\) authorities rejected the proposal of participating in the discussion as the program decided to remain an economic critic of the microcredit scheme. I was surprised when I did not get cooperation from the top management of Grameen Bank. NGOs get worried if they find that you are going to report negatively about them,” the news reporter said. From one of her field experiences, the news reporter stated that “NGOs will be happy if they know that you will report in favor of them. I worked for Interpress news service then. I was assigned to visit a donor-funded HIV/AIDS project in Rajshahi, a Northwestern district in Bangladesh. They did not allow me to visit the project. Later I heard that they only strictly monitored field visits for news media”.

Two journalists commented that the lack of access to NGOs for news related information is not that different from government offices or private organizations. Like other private and government organizations, NGOs also prefer positive coverage by news media. It is still challenging to get information from NGOs when news reporters want to do critical news reporting.

**Conclusion:**

NGOs following a rights-based approach are apt to get more coverage, because issues of governance, human rights, and social justice get priority in newsrooms. Even so, news media usually cover NGO activities unless they threaten advertising revenue. In general, newspapers promote organizations whose philosophies accord with their own. Newspapers interested in promoting human rights, women's rights, secularism, and democratic participation support NGOs with a common agenda.

Developmental NGOs’ media strategy targets not only the NGO beneficiaries, but also other stakeholders in development, local and international donors, and the government. NGOs recognize and use the commercial orientation and agenda-setting function of mass media. Along with sending press releases, NGOs seek to cultivate relationships with journalists and when possible media management. NGO staff dealing with the news media need to be proactive and media-oriented.

Developmental organizations often get less coverage than they expect. Informants from the NGO sector blame this on a lack of knowledge about developmental issues on the part of journalists, both reporters and gatekeepers. Journalists accepted this criticism, but stressed that NGO staff need to a richer understanding of the news media in order to get better coverage. Reporters said that NGOs need to tell them about current activities. Reporters also noted that some developmental NGOs wrongly expect developmental news to get the same prominence as political, crime, or other sensational news. Informants observed that some NGOs pay journalists for unmerited coverage, a practice that taints the NGO sector overall and makes it more difficult for effective but non-paying organizations to get coverage. Though NGOs receive largely positive coverage, journalists believe that NGOs' shortcomings deserve more attention than they get. For example, due to relationships between newspaper editors and NGO chiefs, newspapers cannot report on excessive interest in micro-credit schemes. Still, journalists agreed that NGOs contribute more to poverty alleviation than the government does.

In summary, the news media's commercial orientation, the practice of paid reporting, a lack of developmental knowledge among journalists, and a lack of skill in development journalism are identified as challenges for Bangladeshi developmental NGOs in their relations with media. From the other side, journalists identified as particular challenges NGOs’ lack of transparency, the rarity of skilled and proactive media relations in the organizations, and NGO chiefs’ close relationships with newspaper editors.

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\(^8\) Grameen Bank Chief Professor Muhammad Yunus is one of the proponents of micro-credit scheme for the poor people. He introduced the practice three decades ago. The microcredit scheme that helped poor people without financial security to have access to bank loans and to improve their economic status, was later adopted as a model for poverty alleviation in different countries (“Prof. Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank Awarded: The Nobel Peace Prize for 2006,” 2006).
or owners. Journalists want developmental NGOs to give them news ideas on different developmental and policy issues, rather than just event and activity information. Such practices can bring NGOs and news media closer together. Earlier studies have also suggested trust-building and fostering relationships on the basis of the needs of news media (Malan, 2005; Hopkins, 2003; Weidman, 2003; Health & Coombs, 2006). The personal relationships in the NGO-media interaction can be used for agenda-setting through advocating a particular policy issue or developmental intervention. To be sure, these relationships can also be obstacles to critical reporting. NGOs receive nearly unconditional support from media (O’Sullivan, 2003).

References


Donovan-Hall, M. (2004). Content and Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Projects (PowerPoint presentation). Year 3, MOI: Session 3, October 18, co-organized by University of Southampton and School of Health Professions and Rehabilitation Sciences.


### Appendix I

**News_Code * News_Source Crosstabulation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>News_Source</th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>News_Code</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expected Count</td>
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<td>12.2%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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Appendix II

Fig 1: Types of News

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<tr>
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<td>df</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 38.3.

Fig 2: News Source Analysis

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*a* 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 57.5.

Fig 3: Difference in News Sources in each type of News

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<th>Value</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear-by-Linear</td>
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<td>.224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*a* 1 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.99.
Appendix III

Interview Questions for Journalists

1. What is your general observation about the development activities of big NGOs (e.g. BRAC, Proshika, Grameen Bank, ASA) in Bangladesh?

2. What kind of experience do you have in dealing with NGO over news report/feature article/opinionate?

3. How do you explain the importance of media relationship strategy for a NGO in the context of facilitating development objectives?

4. How do the big NGOs maintain relationship with media? Do you find any difference in media relationship activities between big and small NGOs or among big NGOs?

5. Can you specifically identify the areas of weakness and strength of NGO-media interaction in Bangladesh? What are the challenges remain within NGO-media relationship in Bangladesh?

6. Do you think there is scope for effective NGO-media interaction in Bangladesh? If yes, what are your recommendations?

Supplementary:
Need for capacity building training for journalists or handbook on reporting NGO or developmental issues to cover development news or NGO affairs?

Interview Questions for NGO Staff

1. What is your general observation about the representation of news on development activities carried out by NGO sector in Bangladesh?

2. How do you explain the importance of media relationship strategy for an NGO in the context of facilitating development objectives? As a development organization, what do you expect from media?

3. How does your organization maintain relationships or interact with news media or journalists? Please explain the media relationship strategy of your organization.

4. What are the challenges you/your organization encounter interacting with news media or journalists?

5. Can you specifically identify the areas of weakness and strength of NGO-media interaction in Bangladesh?

6. Do you think there is a scope for effective NGO-media interaction in Bangladesh? If yes, what are your recommendations?

Supplementary:
Need for media relations capacity building program for NGO professionals?