

# Promoting Media and Information Literacy: A Case Study of Bangladesh Public Sector

## *Abstract*

*Media and information literacy provides a strong platform for young people to contribute to social, political and economic development not only on local and national levels, but also on the sub-regional and international levels. By ensuring access of the larger cross-sections of people to different media, facilitating their understanding of the media and helping them express themselves using the media – media and information literacy enable them to become effective citizens of the evolving knowledge society.*

*Smooth functioning of any state is dependent not only on good management of the state functionaries but also on the interaction of the state with the citizenry. State as being the basic service provider to the citizens needs to be open and transparent to the people so that the receivers of the state services have access to all required information as and when required. Any sort of information gap might lead to service failures which in turn would create mistrust, tension and dissatisfaction among the citizens, resulting in governance failure. Media and information can bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor. The present study has been undertaken to facilitate a holistic understanding of government information management, people's awareness of the availability of government information and the difficulties being faced by them in accessing the government information in context of Bangladesh. It is a survey research, which uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. In quantitative method, data have been collected through a questionnaire and in qualitative method, data have been extracted from the stakeholders through interviews.*

*A country of 160 million people, Bangladesh has made substantial advancements in the proliferation of technological facilities even to the grassroots, while, at the same time, suffers from the consequences of large scale digital and information divide between the rural and urban areas. Government's recent initiatives to make public information reach even the remotest and most far-flung areas have met with considerable successes, while, lack of public awareness and transparency regarding the role of information in development have been hurting GO and NGO initiatives in this regard. Some of the major findings of this paper are that, the respondents are not satisfied with the quality, objectivity, and the process of information dissemination of the public offices in Bangladesh. The respondents of this survey considered failure of delivering information as examples of poor governance. They opined that media can be an effective force to solve this problem. Media and information literacy, therefore, has the potential to become a powerful and positive force in democracy and development. The paper concludes with a view that since people, especially young people are immensely influenced by different media in this era of globalization, there is a felt need to develop a new vision of media and information literacy. Media and information literacy will provide young people with the skills required for effectively participating in development activities, using creative media and providing opportunities to gather, analyze and disseminate information.*

## **Key words:**

*Information, Accountability, Media, Literacy, Transparency, Government, right to information, access to information,*

## **Introduction**

In today's increasingly globalized world, media and information literacy are considered as two of the most important capabilities required by global citizens. A citizen of a free and democratic country has the right to have access to information and know everything happening around her/him. It is a fundamental right of every citizen as enshrined in the UN resolution in its very first session in 1946, stating that 'Freedom of

information is a fundamental human right.' However, access to information is directly linked with the ability of people to identify their information needs and take necessary action to make those needs fulfilled. This has catapulted information and media literacy to the centre of public attention because, in a world characterized by the proliferation of various media, we must have a good command not only over information sources but also a whole plethora of media which are used to disseminate and share information. Although democratic societies of the developed world have achieved considerable advances in this regard, the developing countries are still lagging far behind in promoting information and media literacy among the larger cross sections of people. There is pressure from media and civil society groups, both domestic and international, for greater access to government information and making the populace more active in seeking their desired information. International bodies and development partners such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund etc. are promoting such practices and laws in the developing world to ensure transparency and accountability, but a lot remains to be done to make any sustainable improvement. Bangladesh, a country of 160 million people, which has been striving hard to put into democratic practices after a long stint with military rules, also is in the forefront of these countries.

The International Convention on Civil & Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by UN General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966 and became effective on 23rd March 1976, in accordance with Article 49. As per article 19 (2) "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice." Bangladesh ratified the convention in 2000 and was pledged bound to guarantee access to information to all its citizens. Article seven of the Bangladesh constitution guarantees basic human rights including access to information. There was however no progress until a draft law was prepared in 2002 and it was promulgated by the past caretaker government in 2008. However, the present government finally passed the Right to Information Act 2009. The RTI is expected to create a more open and democratic society. Information can empower poor communities. The easy access to information can create awareness about peoples' rights and responsibilities of government. Citizens can take part in development projects upon information and shall have the due share and also can ensure balanced development of different regions, and also work for equality among man and woman, rich and poor, people in power and in opposition. People can know about the utilization of their tax money paid to the government exchequer.

The RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh has some unique features to guarantee the right of the citizens. As per article 9 of the act, no request shall be summarily rejected on the ground of national security, but if there is any part of the request that is not related to national security it must be disclosed to the citizen who has sought such information. The Act has superseded all prevailing acts including the official Secrecy Act 1923, meaning there is no restriction on free flow of information. Some of the information like life, death, arrest, confinement or release by law enforcing agencies etc. must be disclosed within 24 hours of request by any citizen. The Government Service Rules 1979 has specified that disclosers of departmental information would be punished but the RTI act exempted them of any punishment. The service rule may be amended to match the RTI act to make the process smooth. Meanwhile, a right of information commission has been formed, a few government departments have assigned an official in their office to attend the request of citizens. But the commission is yet to have enough manpower and administrative structure to start functioning properly.

The library and information professionals and journalists, in particular, are also actively pursuing the spread of information and media literacy in Bangladesh. However, in order to effectively sensitize the broader part of the vast population of the country, it requires a strong and concerted effort of vast proportion involving the government and non-government sectors and the civil society.

### **Media and information literacy: concepts**

**UNESCO defines** "Information and media literacy enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become skillful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right." **According to Wikipedia "Information and Media Literacy (IML)** is one of the essential capacities that enables people to interpret and make informed

judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become skillful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right.”

David Considine, chair of the first National Media Literacy Conference in 1995, defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create information in a variety of media formats including print and non-print.

### **According to IFLA**

“Media and Information Literacy consists of the knowledge, the attitudes, and the sum of the skills needed to know when and what information is needed; where and how to obtain that information; how to evaluate it critically and organise it once it is found; and how to use it in an ethical way.”

### **Origin and Background of the study**

The current research has been undertaken to assess the present state of information and media literacy in Bangladesh as well as to put forward concrete recommendations for improvement. In a society as mass mediated and media saturated as our own, media, their messages and their structures, must be taken seriously. But, while communications systems and information flows become increasingly central components of social, economic and political activity at all levels, media education, or media literacy as it is often called, remains fairly marginal. Fortunately, that marginality is changing. Parents, community, educators, religious organizations, special interest groups and others are taking on the task of media literacy. Bangladesh is no exception. The literacy rate of the country is 55.9 (Human Development Index 2011) and there has been a growing recognition of the importance of media and information literacy among the larger cross sections of people in recent times. This provides the basic idea of this study which aims at facilitating the promotion of media and information literacy in the country. As we know, various information channels and media play a major role in shaping our thoughts, concepts, beliefs and attitude in modern times. Therefore, assessing people’s perception about the media and also their understanding about information flow to and from these channels is crucial to help them move forward in this increasingly media-centric information society.

### **Objective of the study and Methodology**

The main objectives of this study are to

- Assess the media and information literacy of educated people of Bangladesh
- Identifying the obstacles for implementing media and information literacy in Bangladesh, and
- Put forward recommendations for enriching and strengthening the media and information literacy campaign in the country.

The study was conducted on 100 respondents who live in Dhaka district at different location. The gender profile of the respondents shows that the majority of the respondents are male. Most of the respondents are private service workers. Majority of the respondents are graduate and their income level range is Taka 20,000 to 30000 per month. With the help of a structured interview format, the respondents were asked for their views. Due to some practical difficulties in accessing these respondents at their workplaces, the interviews were conducted door to door.

### **Limitation of the study:**

The survey was conducted in urban area and most of them are well educated. So awareness of Media and Literacy is marginal. But there is little awareness regarding right to information and the necessity of having such a right, especially with regard to empowering the citizens. People in Bangladesh face great difficulties in accessing even the most mundane information from public authorities. The majority of the people in Bangladesh are landless, and they survive by selling their own labour. This marginalized majority is at the mercy of the state, big business and trans-national entities who, routinely make decisions affecting their lives, without taking their opinions into any account. The idea of human rights is not well known among the majority landless population, but if they could be made aware of their rights,

and if the Right to Information could be made understandable to them, there would surely be a mass-movement to get those rights, including RTI. In that case media and information can play a vital role.

### **Analysis of data and responses**

The questionnaire was divided into a few major parts, each of the parts covering different aspects. The first part was focused on assessing the media and information literacy possessed by the respondents along with his/her demographic statistics. The second part covered the obstacles faced by the respondents in locating, retrieving, analyzing and processing their desired information as well as the media used for this purpose. The third part focused on the perceptions and recommendations of the respondents for promoting media and information literacy in Bangladesh.

According to the result of the survey, 32% respondents admit that they are totally unaware of the importance of media and information literacy in context of socio-economic development of Bangladesh. 68% informed that, they are aware of media and information literacy, but lack a clear understanding of the implications and ramifications of the concepts. When asked whether they believe that media and information literacy can positively contribute in sustainable development, 60% opined that, they think so.

As the analysis shows, the majority of the respondents agreed that media can play a vital role to improvement of access to information will improve transparency and accountability of the Government. The most interesting information is that people are not getting most of the information from Internet (45%). There is a large information gap between government and public information delivery (74%). The most important finding is that there is no information desk at the government offices (80%). It also shows that 86% of the respondents believe that receiving information is fundamental human rights. 70% believe that the overall condition of Bangladesh is not conducive to receiving their desired information. A large majority of the respondents (78%) think that, government workers are neither motivated nor prepared to provide information to the common people.

68% respondents are of the opinion that, bureaucracy is the major roadblock towards receiving information. 25% indicate that, weak telecommunication infrastructure of the country is to blame for this predicament. Other notable responses are: widespread illiteracy, corruption, political turmoil, lack of policy support from the government, apathy of GO-NGO workers, lack of proper legal support, weakness of mass media, etc. 58% respondents believe that, launching a massive awareness campaign in educational institutions is the key to overcoming these problems and to make people more media and information literate. A large majority of them think that, the government must link media and information literacy to their ongoing campaign for creating a Digital Bangladesh by the year 2021. They also advocated for carrying out similar interventions like the developed world would help strengthen the state of media and information literacy in Bangladesh.

### **Recommendations**

The present study unmistakably shows that, for ensuring sustainable development of a country, there should be free flow of information and people must receive development information from both public and private sources in an unhindered manner. If they are to do so, they must be information and media literate so that they can access various sources of information, use media and channels for doing so and, after evaluating the information retrieved, utilize it for solving livelihood problems. In light of the findings of the study, the following recommendations could be put forward for promoting media and information literacy in Bangladesh:

1. Government must take an active role in promoting media and information literacy. It is often seen that, government workers are reluctant to either give the desired information to the people or to help them get access to various information sources. Therefore, a proactive role from the government is the key to promote media and information literacy in Bangladesh.
2. The available channels of information should be strengthened so that people can use these media for receiving their desired information. For this, the country's weak telecommunications

- infrastructure must be strengthened and more new and evolving technologies should be applied in the sector.
3. An all-out campaign should be taken to introduce media and information literacy studies in all educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities. Library and information professionals and journalists should be made responsible for conducting these courses so that students can attain in-depth knowledge on media and information literacy.
  4. Steps need to be taken to lessen and gradually remove bureaucratic complexities from every echelon of administration in the GO and NGO sector, especially the government sector. It has been frequently seen that, government workers deliberately harass common people in getting information. The bureaucracy must be motivated and enabled to provide information to the people as and when required.
  5. The role of library and information professionals is crucial for promoting media and information literacy. At present, they are being involved in this process and, consequently, the state of media and information literacy in the country is seriously weakened. Therefore, the library and information professionals should be actively involved in this sector under the leadership of Library Association of Bangladesh (LAB) and other professional organizations.
  6. The number of available channels and media must be increased so that the country's huge population can use these channels from all parts of the country. At the same time, new and innovative ways of disseminating information to the different cross sections of people must be devised.
  7. Adequate funds need to be allocated for carrying out media and information literacy campaigns. At present a handful of NGOs are engaged in this campaign. They should be provided with logistics and policy supports to carry out their activities vigorously.

### **Conclusions:**

Developing countries like Bangladesh often do not have adequate legal provisions for ensuring the right to information. Fewer than 7.5 percent of African countries have an enforceable right to information law (Darch, 2009). Experts suggest the main obstacles include a failure of political leadership, a culture of secrecy, low public awareness, and institutional barriers (Carter Centre, 2010). Crucially, the passage of an access to information law may be a necessary but insufficient step towards meaningful access to information: governments and citizens must be adequately able and willing to implement, enforce and use the laws. Implementation and enforcement of the law are the most critical and challenging stages of reform (Neuman, 2009). The involvement of civil society in the promotion of media and information literacy is considered crucial for paving the way for creating a media and information conscious society.

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