



THE STATE OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM DURING COVID-19: A STUDY ON PRINT MEDIA OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This study seeks to find out how investigative reporting was portrayed in Bangladeshi print media during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic. This study applied the content analysis method to examine the investigative reports (N=58), followed by a quantitative and thematic approach to assess the state of investigative journalism practice in Bangladesh. The findings of this study revealed that the theme of crime and health-related issues has received the highest attention in investigative reports. Some investigation reports focused primarily on COVID-19 related issues, with medical equipment and hospital safety settings being the most often reported subjects. The study also found some notable discourse stating that government officials have mostly been cited as the primary source in investigative journalism. In addition, a substantial number of unnamed sources were also found in these reports. However, future studies can assess the quality of the investigative reports through textual analysis carried out over a longer period.

Keywords: Investigative journalism, COVID-19, Print media, News coverage, Bangladesh

Introduction

COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, and since then, it has continued to be a persistent and pressing global health challenge. As of July 26, 2023, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide has reached 768,560,727, including 6,952,522 deaths (World Health Organization, 2023). In Bangladesh, as of May 2, 2023, there have been 29,446 reported deaths attributed to the novel coronavirus (Statista, 2023), besides Bangladesh has experienced almost thirty epidemics in the last 20 years. Major epidemics in this country include Dengue, Chikungunya, Diphtheria, Avian Influenza, Nipah virus, Acute Neurological Syndrome and COVID-19 which has broken all pandemic records (Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, 2020).

In general, journalism is essential during a disease outbreak or pandemic to disseminate vital information that impacts public safety (Choi & McKeever, 2019). During times of emergency crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable shift in democratic governments taking on more authoritarian roles. Journalism holds significant importance in a democracy (Bhushan, 2023; Sommer & Rappel-Kroyzer, 2022), particularly investigative journalism, which plays a vital role in such challenging situations in exposing COVID-19 corruption (Mututwa & Ufuoma, 2022). But investigative journalism worldwide is encountering challenges in fulfilling its role as the watchdog of society. These challenges encompass various aspects, such as the influence of advertisers' interests, interference from politicians (Gerli et al., 2018), and secret services (Gerli et al., 2018; Marciano & Yadlin, 2022).

Furthermore, in Bangladesh, investigative journalism is currently experiencing fear of distinction for the Digital Security Act 2018 (Rahman, 2014). Moreover, fear of a lawsuit, the Press Council's limited jurisdiction, muscle power, the administration's unwillingness to cooperate, and a trend toward syndicate and desk reporting hinder investigative journalism in Bangladesh (Robaet et al., 2014). According to Reporters Without Borders, also known as Reporters Sans Frontières or RSF, Bangladesh is presently ranked 162 out of 180 nations in terms of press freedom ("Bangladesh Drops", 2022).

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The media has sometimes not fulfilled its role as expected. It encounters hurdles when covering a health crisis. During Avian flu, Leask et al. (2010) demonstrated that Australian journalists struggled to reconcile several, sometimes opposed aims while functioning under substantial operational constraints. Moreover, Klemm et al. (2016) focused on content analysis to see how the media dramatized H1N1 flu globally, while research on U.S. and South African newspapers found that published stories on a pandemic were episodic, lacking self-efficacy and sensational (Dudo et al., 2007; Wasserman et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Previous research examined newspaper content focusing on COVID-19 news coverage, agenda setting and framing of different themes and news sources using content analysis, critical discourse technique and other methods (Marciano & Yadlin, 2022; Mututwa & Ufuoma, 2022).

Chinedu-Okeke et al. (2021) studied Nigerian newspapers and found that most COVID-19 coverage and reports were hard news, features, and editorials. The study indicated that whereas newspapers supplied substantial coverage of COVID-19 issues, they do not give the COVID-19 pandemic notable significance. Zafri et al. (2021) analysed 7,209 media articles covering the COVID-19 pandemic from January 1, 2020, to October 31, 2020. The study identified twelve key topics: origin and outbreak of COVID-19, healthcare system response, economic impact, govt. assistance, lifestyle impact, regular updates, pharmaceutical measures, expert opinions, non-pharmaceutical measures, vaccine updates, local unusual system activities, and testing facilities. Basch et al. (2020) analyzed 5,285 articles, and they revealed the top five themes in U.S. newspapers including financial impact of COVID-19, tales of afflicted persons, the death and mortality rates, and public precaution advice. Chen et al. (2020) studied 499 Chinese newspaper articles on tourism and nine themes were identified, including COVID-19's impact on tourism, and post-crisis tourism products. In Finland, the initial months of the intensive phase of the COVID-19 epidemic were marked by a significant, but not unusual, decline in climate coverage from the previous high (Lyytimäki et al., 2020). A linear growing tendency was found in press coverage on migrant labourers' difficulties during the three lockdowns in India (Raj et al., 2021). Jordanian newspapers were interested in publicizing cyberbullying subjects during the pandemic (Tahat et al., 2020).

Some researchers tried to investigate health news trends around this outbreak. Itheme et al. (2022) observed that Nigerian newspapers predominantly featured COVID-19 information in the form of statistics/case updates, reports on food/palliative distribution, and the repercussions of COVID-19 on the economy and other sectors. Gupta et al. (2022) conducted a content analysis focusing on media coverage of COVID-19 health information in India. Their findings revealed that most articles were in line with the WHO COVID-19 updates, providing accurate information on topics such as symptoms, risk factors for severe symptoms, transmission, and prevention. However, a concerning aspect was that 40% of the media coverage regarding treatment options contained misleading information, including claims that treatments like plasma therapy or chloroquine were effective.

However, in-depth reporting was lacking regarding health and nutrition-related COVID-19 awareness. Basch et al. (2020) assessed Wall Street Journal and New York Times and found reports on infection rates, ventilator use, mortality, economic losses, and the pandemic's environment. Also, epidemic, economic effects, and societal implications were major media frames (Hubner, 2021).

Mach et al. (2021) examined 1,331 news published in U.K. and North American newspapers. The study found that populist-right newspapers have the moderate scientific quality and little sensationalism. Fox (2021) studied 330 editorials and found that although newspapers were reluctant to admit the spread, their earliest editorials were threatening. Additionally, they uncovered that China and Taiwan politicized the outbreak whereas Hong Kong editors stayed neutral to avoid politicization. On the other hand, the pandemic brought financial benefits for Korean editors. Hart et al. (2020) looked at U.S. newspapers and television news coverage and discovered that it was extremely contentious and highly politicized. Early news coverage of COVID-19 may have contributed to its politicization in the U.S. (Hubner, 2021).

Apuke and Omar (2021) found that Nigerian state-controlled media networks attributed government leaders as the primary news source more frequently compared to commercial media. Private media channels were negative and used graphics often. On the other hand, Hubner (2021) evaluated 1,034 news from The New York Times and The Washington Post and found that individuals, interest group members, and politicians were the most quoted

sources in early media coverage. Nielsen et al. (2020) revealed that the UK government (38%) and individual politicians (37%) were the most commonly identified sources responsible for potentially false or misleading information about the coronavirus. Examining 2,979 news articles from four West Yorkshire newspapers, O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) observed a growing dependence of journalists on their audience as a source for news. However, the study highlighted that relying solely on single-source information lacks comprehensive perspective. Nielsen et al. (2020) conducted a study on the public perception of news coverage and revealed that 35% of respondents felt that media reporting had worsened the coronavirus situation in the UK. On the other hand, a majority of 56% of respondents recognized the positive role played by news media in helping them understand the pandemic better. During the COVID-19 outbreak, few studies have been done on newspaper coverage in Bangladesh. Sultana et al. (2020) identified the different news content of COVID-19 coverage in the major national dailies of Bangladesh during the pre-lockdown to the end of the lockdown period. The study showed that COVID-19 related prevention, impacts, mitigation, preparedness, and world concern were the major themes in the newspapers. Regarding news sources, Dutta et al. (2020) showed that The Daily Kalerkantho relied more on experts, The Daily Ittefaq utilized international sources regularly, while The Daily Star relied substantially more on govt. personnel. Mamun and Sheikh (2020) also found an undue reliance on govt. official sources in news stories. This study also revealed an absence of investigative and follow-up reports during COVID-19.

Regarding investigative journalism, there has been minimal substantial research in this field conducted in Bangladesh, except for a study carried out in 1994. Riaz and Chowdhury (1994) found 58 investigative reports in Bangladeshi newspapers. Among them, 40 news reported on national concerns while 18 reported on local matters, whereas English newspapers ignored rural life. Also, 77% of investigation reports were about business, economy, crime, law enforcement, social services, and health. Many publications were based on govt. information and many investigative pieces had unidentified and unreliable sources (Khan & Raji, 1996).

Investigative journalism is essential as it reveals local and national corruption, irregularities, illegal conduct and more (Coronel, 2009; Rahman, 2014; Robaet et al., 2014). During the COVID-19 period, some exceptional pieces of investigative news exposed Bangladesh's failing health system. These studies indicate that this sector is prevalent with corruption. In addition to these, numerous additional crimes were committed. As there was no previous research on this subject in this particular COVID19 context, this study will therefore try to examine how investigative journalism was portrayed in Bangladeshi print media during the Coronavirus epidemic to evaluate which facts were revealed and how they were presented. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How much coverage and treatment of investigative news has been given during the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the themes of investigative news, especially related to COVID-19?

RQ3: What are the focuses of investigative news?

RQ4: What types and categories of sources are used in investigative news?

Materials and Method

This study conducted a content analysis method to examine the coverage, thematic meaning and message of the investigative reports published in the selected Bangladeshi newspaper during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method was formerly utilized in numerous domains, including climate change and global warming research, environmental difficulties, and ecological analysis (Chandelier et al., 2018; Bhatia et al., 2013; Billett, 2009; Jacobson et al., 2011), political analysis (Bauer et al., 2016), education sciences (Blei, 2012), and tourist crisis (Chen et al., 2020). In this research, content analysis was selected due to its capacity to analyze huge volumes of data and identify broad trends (Deacon et al., 1999). This method permits the formulation of subjects independently by evaluating newspaper content (Roberts et al., 2013). In addition, studying the diversity of newspaper content using structural topic modelling (content analysis) might help to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic features of pandemics, including their social, political, and economical ramifications (Westgate et al., 2015).

Data were collected from The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and Samakal and the criterion used in this instance is the newspaper's readership in the language category. According to the country's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, readership numbers for the year 2019 show that all three are among the top 10 widely read newspapers ("Eight Newspapers", 2020). The Daily Star has 0.2 million readers and holds the first position among

English-language daily newspapers. Prothom Alo and Samakal have 0.044 million and 0.04 million readers, respectively and have ranked among the top 10 Bengali-language daily newspapers.

This study examined one month of published news stories during the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh as crises are more newsworthy at their early stages (An & Gower, 2009). Coronavirus made its first appearance in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020 (Islam et al., 2020). Bangladeshi newspapers covered the pandemic more after its announcement (Dutta et al., 2020). Therefore, March 2020 was considered an appropriate month for the research. All the investigative reports published in these newspapers during this period were selected for analysis. The selection of news adhered to a process of purposive sampling. This approach consists of subjects picked based on particular features or qualities and excludes those who do not fulfil these standards (Wimmer & Dominick, 2022). News articles (N = 58) concerned with investigative journalism were collected from the selected newspapers inspired by a similar study conducted by Riaz and Chowdhury (1995), Crude Reading and Direct Enquiry methods were used. These two sorts of techniques were selected in response to two major criticisms of conventional content analysis. First, without manifest meaning, content analysis cannot disclose the latent meaning of the data. Second, it emphasizes the quantitative aspect. The way of crude reading helps to circumvent these constraints, particularly the second one. In addition to the quantity, it is believed that the features of the newspapers will not be transparent. The data gathered in this method can reveal information that would not be discernible through content analysis (Berelson, 1952).

Since this study is concerned with investigative journalism, only investigative reports were evaluated. To find investigative news this study followed the definition of investigative journalism. Investigative journalism is the process of (i) revealing confidential information through (ii) in-depth research and (iii) planned investigations over (iv) a long period. Any good investigative news should consist of at least four of these basic characteristics. Also, there could be a few other factors such as risk, accountability, public interest, impact on policy, etc. However, depending on the story and various reasons, some characteristics could be missing or receive less importance in an investigative article (Robaet et al., 2014; Coronel, 2009). Primarily, these characteristics were explored while reading the news stories. News that lacked any of the four basic criteria was excluded from the analysis.

Coding

To eliminate errors and biases, all articles were examined by two well-trained coders. Each coder independently coded the news articles. For the inter-coder reliability test, two coders independently coded 20 news collected from selected newspapers over two weeks. Using Holsti's method, the reliability between coders was 0.92. Holsti's inter-coder reliability refers to the level of agreement between two or more independent coders using the same coding method to evaluate the same sample units. Coders with scores of 0.9 or higher are regarded as very reliable (Mao, 2017). This method is valuable for evaluating inter-coder reliability.

Based on the preliminary reading of the news stories, relevant academic literature, and research questions, a coding system was developed. Some coding categories were derived from a report on a worldwide assessment of news coverage by the press, radio, and television in 29 nations sponsored by UNESCO/IAMCR (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984). Additionally, a few modifications have been made considering the societal context of Bangladesh (Riaz and Chowdhury, 1995). The pilot study of 20 news assisted in evaluating and adjusting the framework, resulting in a final coding framework of 12 categories.

These coding characteristics include (1) news coverage, which was categorized into urban-oriented and rural-oriented; (2) news treatment, which consists of lead news, series report, special day report, infographic, banner headlines, and the number of pictures. (3) news themes, which include crime and law enforcement agency (LEA), COVID-19, corruption, infrastructure, maladministration, politics, animal, education, agriculture, economy, and environment. Here, LEA consists of any law enforcement agency of the state and the crimes that are related to the news; (4) COVID-19-related news themes, which consist of equipment, hospital preparation and safety measurement, COVID test, vaccine, and medicine; (5) news focus, which includes different news topics such as land grab, illegal river occupy, etc.; (6) reporting sources, which was categorized into an unnamed person, LEA sources, observance, other research, users-generated, and press release; (7) source of pictures, which was classified into captured, unknown, and collected; (8) categories of sources, which was categorized into document source and human source; (9) commonly used document sources, which consists of govt. data, LEA records, and other data;

(10) commonly used human sources, which include govt. officials, locals, political persons, LEA officials, and others; (11) gender division of human sources, which were categorized into male, female, and unknown sources. These factors are essential components of news analysis (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Trevor Thrall, 2006). Google Form is used by the coders to input the data while coding the selected news reports. Microsoft Excel 2016 is used to improve the precision and speed of the analytic process (Zamawe, 2015).

Results

RQ1 asked about the news coverage and treatment of investigative news. As shown in table 1, most of the news regions were urbanized. The coverage of 50 news regions was urban-oriented, which is 86.2%. On the other hand, only 8 news coverage were rural-oriented, that is 13.8%. More than half (58.6%) of the news items were designated as the lead news. The analysis found that 18 articles—31% of the sample—were labelled as series reports. However, only 2 news—3.4% of the sample—were published on a special day. Infographic and banner headlines appeared on 1 news (1.7%) each. Overall, nearly half (41.4%) of the investigative news—in 24 of the articles—contained an image.

Table 1. Coverage and Treatment of Investigative News

Variables	Categories	Count	%
1. News Coverage (N = 58)	Urban-Oriented	50	86.2
	Rural-Oriented	8	13.8
	Total	58	100
2. News Treatment	Lead News	34	58.6
	Series Report	18	31
	Special Day Report	2	3.4
	Infographic	1	1.7
	Banner Headlines	1	1.7
	Number of Pictures	24	41.4

Note. Counts and percentages in News Treatment represent the presences of a treatment.

RQ2 inquired about the themes of investigative news, especially related to COVID-19. More than one-third (36.2%) of the article issues were related to LEA, precisely 21 news. Twelve articles, or 20.7% of the total sample, were focused on COVID-19 related theme. Themes related to corruption, infrastructure, and maladministration were found in 12 articles combined—20.7% of the sample. Moreover, stories about other themes were also found, including politics, animals, education, agriculture, economy, and the environment (figure 1). Of the twelve articles related to the COVID-19 theme, almost half of them (41.6%) were equipment based. Only 3 news were related to hospital preparation and safety measurement, accounting for 25% of the selected sample. Themes related to COVID test accounted for 16.7% of the total, and both vaccine and medicine-related themes combined also constituted 16.7% (figure 2). These reports are tabulated in table 2 concerning investigative news themes and COVID-19-related news themes.

Table 2. Themes of Investigative News & COVID-19-related News

Variables	Categories	Count (per)	Count	%
3. News Themes (N = 58)	Crime and Law Enforcement Agency (LEA)		21	36.2
	COVID-19		12	20.7
	Corruption; Infrastructure; Maladministration;	4	12	20.7
	Politics; Animal; Education; Agriculture	2	8	13.8
	Economy		3	5.2
	Environment		2	3.4
	Total		58	100
4. COVID-19-related News Themes (N = 12)	Equipment		5	41.6
	Hospital Preparation and Safety		3	25
	Measurement			
	COVID Test		2	16.7
	Vaccine; Medicine	1	2	16.7
Total			12	100



Figure 1. Themes of Investigative News



Figure 2. Themes of COVID-19-related News

RQ3 asked about the focus of investigative news. The most repeated topic was found on issues of land grab, illegal river occupying, hills razed, and extortion—27.6% of the total sample. The remaining (72.4%) articles include topics namely, fake revenue stamps, adulteration, revenue evasion, illicit tobacco, financial fraud, illegal mobile, mugged, animal abuse, illegal gas cylinder, election fraud, illegal dam, illegal slum, illegal business, illegal river excavation, illegal sand traders, unlicensed vehicle, illegal coal mining, illegal kiln, illegal sand extraction, fake passport, smuggling workers, beatings, vandalism, illegal salt cultivation, outdated rabies vaccine, syndicate, illegal pond filling, road safety project corruption, fake sanitizer, and ambulance syndicate (see table 3 and figure 3).

Table 3. Focus of Investigative News

Variables	Categories	Count (per)	Count	%
5. News Focus (N = 58)	Land Grabs; Illegal River Occupies; Hills Razed; Extortion	4	16	27.6
	Fake Revenue Stamps; Adulteration; Revenue Evasion	3	9	15.5
	Illicit Tobacco; Financial Fraud; Illegal Mobile; Mugged; Animal Abuse	2	10	17.2
	Illegal Gas Cylinder; Election Fraud; Illegal Dam; Illegal Slum; Illegal Business; Illegal River Excavation; Illegal Sand Traders; Unlicensed Vehicle; Illegal Coal Mining; Illegal Kiln; Illegal Sand Extraction; Fake Passport; Smuggling Workers; Beatings; Vandalism; Illegal Salt Cultivation; Outdated Rabies Vaccine; Syndicate; Illegal Pond Filling; Road Safety Project	1	23	39.7
	Corruption; Fake Sanitizer; Ambulance Syndicate	1	23	39.7
	Total		58	100

Discussion

This study finds that most of the investigative reports are related to LEA and COVID-19-related themes. In addition, land grabs, illegal river occupying, hills razed, and extortion are some of the common focuses of investigative news during COVID-19. Though, healthcare and economic impact were the most common themes during COVID-19 in the majority of the studies (Basch et al., 2020; Zafri et al., 2021; Itheme et al., 2022). Climate coverage, tourism, and migrant laborer's themes were also spotted in investigative reporting during the pandemic (Lyytimäki et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Raj et al., 2021). In this study, health and nutrition, and the environment are the second most repetitive news themes. However, Riaz and Chowdhury (1995) discovered that 77% of investigative reports in Bangladeshi newspapers were about business, economy, crime, law enforcement, social services, and health.

A separate discursive analysis of the COVID-19-related news theme has been conducted. This study found only 12 news related to the COVID-19 theme. It shows that hospital equipment news is the most reported topic. Following that, hospital preparation and safety measurement-related discourse is also found. Similarly, in U.S. newspapers reports on the use of ventilator-related topics were found most reported topic (Basch et al., 2020).

This study found that more than half (58.9%) of the sources used in these reports are unnamed sources. LEA sources are also mentioned frequently. In terms of categories of sources, 80.4% of them are human sources. Among them, the most repeated human sources are govt. officials, and locals. In addition, political persons, and LEA officials are also used repeatedly. Likewise, U.S. newspapers and state-run media in Nigeria mentioned govt. leaders and politicians frequently. Similar results were found within the context of Bangladesh (Riaz and Chowdhury, 1995; Mamun and Sheikh, 2020). Dutta et al. (2020) discovered that The Daily Star used more govt. employees. However, The Daily Kalerkantho relied more on experts, whereas The Daily Ittefaq used foreign sources. In addition, interest group members, audience, and individuals were the most often referenced sources in U.S. and Nigeria (Hubner, 2021; Apuke & Omar, 2021). In this research, LEA records are most frequently used source in terms of both human and documental sources. Likewise, O'Neill and O'Connor (2008) found police among the top mentioned sources. However, many investigative reports used questionable sources (Riaz & Chowdhury, 1995; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). Similarly, this research found 99 unknown persons used as a source.

This research found that nearly half (41.4%) of the investigative news contained an image. Riaz and Chowdhury (1995) found only 3 pictures in 58 investigative news. Therefore, in both the past and the present, the use of photos in investigative reporting is unremarkable. Though the majority of the news are lead news in our findings indicating the significance of investigative reporting, Mamun & Sheik (2020) and Turkel et al. (2021) found the declining number of investigative reporting during COVID-19 which indicates the less important in this regard.

Moreover, this study discovered that investigative news is mostly focused on urban-oriented issues. Similarly, in the 1990s, monthly newspaper coverage featured 40 city-centric news articles and 18 rural-centric news stories (Riaz & Chowdhury, 1995). Moreover, Hart et al. (2020) found that newspaper coverage is extremely polarized.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is considered one of the most vulnerable countries in terms of both natural catastrophe and the press freedom index. Investigative reporting in Bangladesh is also facing difficulties because of severe draconian laws and pressure, where COVID-19 placed additional burdens. Thus, the focus of this study is on the status of investigative journalism in Bangladesh in this particular context. During times of emergency crises, the media has encountered difficulties in carrying out its essential role as the watchdog of society. Consequently, it becomes highly significant to thoroughly examine and evaluate the extent, focus, and sources of media reporting during these critical periods. This study, while valuable in assessing the current state of investigative journalism amid an emergency crisis, does have certain limitations. Specifically, it may not fully address the framing and tone of investigative news through textual analysis. Nevertheless, the insights obtained from this research can still serve as a guiding reference for the media to be more conscious of their responsibilities during these challenging times. Future study employing textual analysis can play a pivotal role in guiding media professionals to adopt a more thoughtful and considerate approach in their reporting. Further studies can be carried out about the quality of investigative reports.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in The Daily Star; Prothom Alo; Samakal; at epaper.thedailystar.net; epaper.prothomalo.com; epaper.samakal.com

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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