World Press Freedom Day

Greening Smart Bangladesh: Role of Media in Sustainable Development

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This year's World Press Freedom Day shines a light on the vital role journalism plays in tackling the environmental threats facing our planet. The United Nations emphasised the importance of a vibrant press in the context of the environmental crisis. Recognising journalism's indispensable role in understanding and addressing environmental challenges, the UN designated the theme for this day as "A Press for the Planet: Journalism in the face of the environmental crisis."

As global environmental concerns escalate, the free flow of information becomes increasingly crucial. This is evidenced by the frequent incidence of severe weather events such as extreme heatwaves, pollution, and natural disasters. People seek insightful analyses beyond mere facts to understand these events. However, with limited time, they often rely on the media to navigate this information.

This dependence highlights the growing public demand for heightened environmental awareness, positioning the mass media as pivotal in disseminating information. A prime example of this appetite for information exists in Bangladesh. This nation, highly vulnerable to climate-related risks, is enduring severe disruptions to its way of life due to a punishing heatwave.

The awful weather has made environmental news prominent in public discourse in the country, both in traditional and social media. Journalists in this field, like their counterparts worldwide, report and communicate these transformative changes in our daily lives. They explore a wide array of subjects, encompassing sustainability, biodiversity, natural disasters, renewable energy sources, environmental policies, and initiatives. Their work sheds light on the entire spectrum of climate change issues and their far-reaching consequences.

However, studies reveal that environmental news reporting in Bangladesh leans heavily on 'episodic' coverage, focusing on specific events or immediate issues and crises. This aligns with observations in other countries. There's a lack of long-term, 'thematic' coverage that delves deeper into the root causes and potential solutions for environmental challenges.

This focus on immediate crises is reflected in the topics covered. The studies show environmental news primarily focuses on pollution (56.7%) and ecology (22.7%), with climate change coverage lagging far behind at just 3.7%. This reflects a global issue—environmental topics, particularly climate change, are not consistently on the news agenda. Global media coverage of these issues is often triggered by events like international conferences or disasters.

Recognizing this gap, Bangladesh's environmental journalism is experiencing a paradigm shift, partly fuelled by a growing appreciation for press freedom. Traditionally, journalists followed a neutral approach, focusing solely on presenting facts. However, a new generation is pushing boundaries, transitioning from neutrality to advocacy. Recognizing the media as a powerful tool for social change, these journalists actively propose solutions and encourage action on environmental issues, particularly climate change.

As the impacts of climate change increase worldwide, media outlets in vulnerable countries like Bangladesh prioritize these issues. Climate journalism is becoming increasingly important, influencing policy and pushing for action to build a future that can withstand these changes. However, news outlets

around the world are facing challenges in their coverage, including limited resources, training gaps, and the risks involved in reporting on climate change.

Thankfully, valuable resources exist to bridge this gap. Organisations like the Earth Journalism Network, Covering Climate Now, and the Society of Environmental Journalists are specifically designed for climate storytelling. Equipping journalists with these skills is crucial to transforming environmental reporting in Bangladesh, allowing them to move beyond episodic coverage and delve deeper into solutions.

The Bangladeshi media has a powerful tool at its disposal: resilient narratives that motivate individuals to engage in climate action. Media outlets are frequently showcasing successful solutions while also capturing the reader's imagination, encouraging them to become part of the solution.

Bangladesh, a nation known for its rapid development and unwavering spirit, is making significant strides towards achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2031. At the same time, the government is formulating an ambitious master plan, "Smart Bangladesh," to leverage technology to improve citizens' lives, strengthen governance, and fuel sustainable economic growth. However, achieving this vision requires a delicate balance: fostering economic prosperity while safeguarding the environment. Here's where media analysis comes in. With critical coverage, media can ensure the 'Smart Bangladesh' vision is implemented in an eco-friendly manner.

The vision of 'Smart Bangladesh' extends beyond mere technology. The government prioritizes sustainability, encompassing sustainable cities, resource management, innovation, and tech-driven policies across all sectors, including transportation, energy, health, economy, and agriculture. Media can play a crucial role in holding the government accountable to this vision and ensuring a sustainable future for Bangladesh.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has already charted a course towards a "Smart Bangladesh" by adopting sustainable solutions. Her leadership has been recognized by the UN-sponsored Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) with the award of the 'SDG Progress Award' for Bangladesh's steady progress towards achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring peace and prosperity for all.

This commitment to sustainability is crucial because, despite contributing minimally to global CO2 emissions, Bangladesh bears a significant burden from climate change due to past, unchecked development. Here, the media emerges as a vital ally in advocating for climate justice.

By highlighting this disparity and urging collective action, the media can amplify Bangladesh's voice. Through promoting international agreements and active participation in the global environmental movement, Bangladesh, with a proactive media by its side, can shape global public opinion and push for solutions that benefit everyone.

The media can play a crucial role in supporting these efforts and promoting a smart environment. Newspapers, television, radio, and online platforms can be powerful tools for sparking public engagement with environmental challenges. Through news reports, documentaries, and educational programmes, the media can inform the public, raise awareness about pressing environmental issues like pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Thus, the media can empower citizens by providing them with the knowledge and resources they need to take action in their communities.

By highlighting initiatives, technologies, and best practices in renewable energy, eco-friendly transportation, waste management, and green building, the media can inspire a shift towards sustainable living. This valuable information empowers individuals, businesses, and communities to adopt greener lifestyles and behaviours, contributing to the "Smart Bangladesh" vision.

Media outlets can also serve as champions for environmental protection and accountability. Investigative journalism exposes environmental injustices, corporate misconduct, and weak policies, holding polluters accountable and advocating for stronger regulations to ensure a sustainable future.

Furthermore, by highlighting success stories in clean technologies and sustainable practices across all media platforms, the media inspires the adoption of these solutions and fosters collaboration for positive environmental change. Media coverage of innovative technologies, research findings, and successful environmental initiatives can be amplified through engaging social media campaigns. Sharing these stories on platforms like Facebook, You tube and Twitter can inspire a wider audience, encourage the development and adoption of solutions critical for achieving a 'Smart Bangladesh.' By showcasing examples of effective environmental stewardship through powerful visuals and interactive content, the media can spark conversations and encourage collaboration among stakeholders on social media.

The media, including traditional outlets and social media platforms, also serves as a platform for public dialogue and engagement on environmental issues. Through opinion pieces, talk shows, and social media discussions, the media facilitates conversations among policymakers, scientists, activists, businesses, and the general public. This fosters greater understanding, collaboration, and collective action for a smart environment. Social media, in particular, allows for real-time discussions and decentralized knowledge sharing, empowering individuals to become active participants in environmental advocacy. However, in Bangladesh, this crucial role faces significant challenges. Journalists encounter obstacles in uncovering and reporting on critical environmental issues like supply chains, climate migration, the extractive industries, illegal activities such as mining and wildlife trafficking, and of course, climate change itself.

The rise of disinformation campaigns surrounding environmental issues further amplifies these hurdles. This type of misinformation is prevalent not only in Bangladesh but also abroad, undermining established knowledge and scientific research methodologies. This poses a serious threat to informed public discourse worldwide. These campaigns can cripple efforts to address climate change and stifle public and political support for climate action. Effective policies, protection for vulnerable communities, and the well-being of women and girls (who are disproportionately impacted by climate change) all suffer when accurate information is lacking. In this context, the UN urges journalists worldwide to report accurately, timely, and comprehensively on environmental issues, their consequences, and potential solutions to achieve sustainable development.

To address these challenges, the UN proposes a comprehensive strategy centred on upholding UNESCO's Guidelines for Digital Platform Governance. These guidelines champion essential freedoms like expression, scientific research, and access to information. Additionally, they advocate for combating disinformation, fostering media diversity, and ensuring accountability of technology companies. User empowerment through due diligence and content moderation based on international human rights standards is also crucial. Finally, the UN emphasises the critical role of promoting media and information literacy. By cultivating a responsible digital environment and empowering media, we can guarantee that accurate information reaches the public, leading to informed decision-making for a sustainable future.

This year's World Press Freedom Day shone a light on the vital role journalism plays in tackling environmental threats. As we face a future shaped by climate change, a free press empowered with accurate information and media literacy initiatives is essential. By informing the public, advocating for change, and holding polluters accountable, the media can be a powerful agent for a sustainable future. Bangladesh, with its ambitious 'Smart Bangladesh' vision, exemplifies the need for a balanced approach that integrates environmental protection with technological advancements. A free and responsible media landscape is crucial for achieving this balance and ensuring a smart environment for all.

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