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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Defensive Journalism in Bangladesh: Consequences of the Digital Security Act on Journalism Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study uses interviews with 15 digital journalists in Bangladesh to determine how the country's Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018, which makes publishing information critical of the government a punishable offence, has influenced journalistic norms and autonomy. Findings show that DSA has led to fear of jail or even disappearance among journalists, limiting journalists' perceived levels of professional autonomy. While previous research shows that journalists may practice self-censorship in such contexts, this research identifies a range of strategic practices that journalists in Bangladesh have developed to publish relevant information while avoiding the consequences of the DSA. Collectively, we refer to these strategies as a practice of 'defensive journalism'. This study adds to our understanding of the relationship between safety, autonomy, and self-censorship specifically in a non-Western, digital context.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy; defensive journalism; Self-Censorship; digital journalism; Bangladesh; censorship

Journalism as a profession is considered one of the most extreme jobs in the world as it includes the potential for harassment, jail, and murder (Hicks 2013). And journalists are facing increasing threats of violence and decreasing levels of autonomy across the globe (Di Salvo 2022; Hamada 2022; Harris, Mosdell and Griffiths 2016). Further, advances in media technology and the growth of digital journalism have led to new forms of censorship, surveillance, and threats to journalists and new impediments to their practice (Di Salvo 2022). The contemporary practice of journalism is especially complex within the Asia Pacific region where media freedom has declined excessively in recent years (RSF 2020, 2021). This is especially true in the context of Bangladesh, yet there is limited extant research analyzing the autonomy of the practice of journalism there.

One cause of the recent drop in media freedom in the context of Bangladesh is the government's introduction of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018, which they renamed as the Cybersecurity Act 2023 (Dhaka Tribune 2023) on Sept 13, 2023[1]. The DSA was purportedly implemented by the Bangladesh government to protect the state's information infrastructure from various cyberattacks. However, it is a repressive law that allows the government's Digital Security Agency to open an inquiry into anyone deemed to be spreading or instigating 'negative propaganda' against the

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government using digital devices, with potential criminal charges and imprisonment for publishing such content on a digital platform (Chowdhury 2020; Lenin 2021). While Bangladesh is technically a parliamentary democracy, the DSA is a further solidification of the government's autocratic tendencies and a blow to press freedom.

This study is a response to calls for context-specific research in the areas of censorship, self-censorship, autonomy and safety and its impacts on journalistic practice in non-Western contexts (Badr 2022; Hamada 2022; Pain and Korin 2021). Using in-depth interviews with 15 journalists working for digital media platforms, this study contextualizes the state's use of emerging cyber-security threats as a justification for press censorship, analyzes journalists' perceptions of its impacts on their safety and professional autonomy, and illuminates the range of strategic practices that journalists have developed to publish relevant information while avoiding the consequences of the DSA. Based on the findings, we introduce the term 'Defensive Journalism' to capture these strategies and conceptualize this approach to journalistic practice and autonomy in authoritarian contexts (Cheruiyot 2024). We argue that while the scholarly concept of self-censorship as a defense mechanism practiced in response to a range of real or perceived external threats is an important starting point for understanding the practice of journalism in such contexts, the term on its own may elide the strategic practices journalists' employ to disseminate sensitive information to a public despite censorship efforts and threats to safety. Instead, we describe a practice of 'defensive journalism' to capture the strategies used by digital journalists to circumvent such threats and, in doing so, to reclaim autonomy. We believe that due to limited extant literature in the context of Bangladesh and on the practice of journalism in authoritarian contexts, alongside growing threats to democracy and attacks on journalists around the world, studying the response of journalists to erosions of media freedom and threats to safety and autonomy is pertinent.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of autonomy is well established in the extant literature. In the field of sociology, autonomy is broadly defined as a "wide latitude of judgement in carrying out professional duties" (McDevitt 2003, p. 156). Within journalism, the term *autonomy* is a fluid, varied and contextual concept (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012; Hughes et al. 2017; Sjøvaag, 2013). However, it is broadly understood to be "a principle that allows the press to fulfill its duty of informing the citizenry, free from partisan bias and other corrupting influences" (McDevitt 2003, p. 156). Journalistic autonomy allows reporters to strive to meet the norms of the field, including "balance, fairness, and objectivity" while performing their perceived duty to inform the public (McDevitt 2003, p. 156). But as Hamada (2022) noted, studies have shown that these professional, normative values of journalism are generally linked to media independence, and thus "represent professional ideologies through which journalists have legitimized their roles in Western democracies (Patterson and Donsbach 1996)" (p. 1716). Given that research that examines professional autonomy has focused primarily on the practice and culture of journalism within Western democracies, it is less clear how the concept and associated values should be applied to the study of journalism practice in non-Western contexts (Hamada 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009).

What is established in the literature is that in contexts where journalists are not broadly free from interference, and thus operate with less autonomy, they tend to adopt 'defensive' strategies, often in the form of self-censorship (Barrios and Miller 2021; Cook and Heilmann 2013; Kim and Shin 2022; Pain and Korin 2021). And given that safety and autonomy are argued to be related concepts (Hamada 2022), we can expect that in contexts in which journalists are less safe, they will have lower levels of autonomy and higher rates of self-censorship. However, we argue that self-censorship as a concept does not illuminate clearly the numerous ways journalists in non-Western, non-democratic contexts attempt to regain autonomy. While studies have begun to examine the counterstrategies used by journalists in such contexts, the extant literature in this area is limited (Barrios and Miller 2021). In an attempt to address this gap in the literature, this study draws from two key strands of research: research on censorship and self-censorship–with particular emphasis on the concepts in regards to digital technology—and research on the interconnectedness of autonomy and safety.

Censorship and Self-Censorship

The normative role of journalism as performing a 'watchdog' function is considered critical to democracy as it holds power accountable through the public sharing of information (Christians et al. 2009). But censorship, whether due to state or commercial pressures, inhibits the ability of the press to act as a "Fourth Estate" (Mortensen 2018; Pain and Korin 2021; Waisbord 2020; Yesil 2014). Advancements in communication technologies and the practice of digital journalism have made new forms of censorship possible. For instance, Waisbord (2020) referred to the online harassment of journalists as a new form of "press censorship in the digital society" (1031). According to Waisbord (2020), online 'mob censorship' threatens journalists' safety and speech rights and is a unique form of censorship distinct from censorship by states, markets, and parastate actors.

Importantly, this same technology can create opportunities for journalists to elide censorship. As Badr (2022) argued, "As the increasingly accessible web opened doors to new ways of doing journalism online (Eldridge et al. 2021), it has made it difficult for authoritarian states to control access of a profession during a period of intense digitization and disruption" (Badr 2022, 1179). As such, Badr (2022) argued that country-specific studies are necessary as the "contexts in each country … shape societal and professional debates" and the "interplay of digitization and journalism in transformative settings harbors both continuity and change" (1179).

While the above refers to censorship as an external force, the term can also refer to "internally self-imposed forms of censorship," such as *self-censorship* (Burt 1994, 21). Lee (1998) defined self-censorship as "a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to a choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organisations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure" (p.52). Lee and Chan (2009) defined media self-censorship as "nonexternally compelled acts committed by media organizations aiming to avoid offending power holders such as the government, advertisers, and major business corporations" (112). And Jungblut and Hoxha (2017) defined self-censorship as "the individual self-restriction of one's

freedom of speech" (p. 127). They further clarified by stating, "Specifically, journalists realize that reporting something would do more harm (to themselves or to others) than good and therefore restrain from covering particular events" (Jungblut and Hoxha 2017, p. 127). While the definitions above refer to organizational and individual actions, these actions are taken in response to external forces, including political, ideological, and commercial pressures (Gans 1979).

While repressive methods of censorship by the state, often seen in authoritarian or semi-democratic contexts, have often been the focus of self-censorship research, recent studies have shown "that outside interference and fear-induced self-censorship have tangible effects on journalism even in democratic countries with strong cultural, legal and institutional safeguards for press autonomy" (Hiltunen 2017, 66). In other words, the practice of self-censorship is not isolated to any single context. Further, as Pain and Korin (2021) argued, "while censorship mechanisms are overt, the practice of self-censorship among journalists is intricate and remains quite unexamined" (72). Extant research on self-censorship tends to examine its practice at the level of the newsroom, rather than analyzing the ways in which individual journalists "respond to its travails and demands, especially in their daily work" (Pain and Korin 2021, 72). As such, work that examines the context specific scenarios journalists face and the ways in which they respond to them is called for.

Scholars have worked to address this deficit by examining journalists' practices and perceptions of self-censorship in various contexts across the globe. For instance, Pain and Korin (2021) recently analyzed Venezuelan journalists' perceptions of self-censorship and professional autonomy; Barrios and Miller (2021) examined the forms of self-censorship used by Colombian journalists in a post-conflict era; and Miles (2022) examined the ways that social systems influence content produced by journalists and the influences that lead foreign journalists to self-censor in the context of Turkey.

Scholarship has also looked at the strategies journalists employ to resist pressures from authoritarian regimes, terrorist groups, and other threats to personal safety, in order to conduct their work. These counterstrategies can be understood as a form of resistance to censorship, and, as we will argue, something that goes a step beyond the conceptualization of self-censorship. For instance, Slavtcheva-Petkova (2019) studied the ways in which liberal journalists resisted Putin's control in Russia in part through the creation of new media platforms in which journalists were the majority stakeholders. Pate and Idris (2017) examined the strategies journalists threatened by the terrorist group Boko Haram adopted, including using eyewitness accounts and nontraditional sources to confirm a story when official sources presented a risk. And Barrios and Miller (2021) studied the various counterstrategies of Colombian journalists to overcome self-censorship in a post-conflict context. Despite the important studies cited above, Barrios and Miller (2021) noted that "the existing literature on counter-strategies is scarce" (1428).

Autonomy and Safety

As Pain and Korin argued, "Journalists adapt to censorship and self-censorship in ways beneficial to their safety and professional autonomy" (2021, 75). Research has shown that professional autonomy is impacted by both perceived and objective influences,

including external political structures (Hamada 2022; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). According to McDevitt (2003), "As a central component of professionalism, autonomy entails self-direction in the application of occupational techniques" (156). This idea of professional autonomy is seen by journalists as requiring high levels of freedom of the media. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021), journalistic autonomy implies freedom from external pressure or influence to conduct their work. And Örnebring and Karlsson (2019) argued that 'autonomy' and 'interdependence' are interconnected and interchangeable terms. As noted previously, autonomy from the government is understood to be critical in order for journalists to perform their normative function as a 'Fourth Estate' (Henrichsen 2020).

Research shows that the quality of democracy in a given context influences the level of press freedom, and that the level of press freedom influences professional autonomy (Hamada 2022). Further, the level of journalistic autonomy in a given context is understood to be a barometer for broader conditions of public speech, especially with regards to speech related to the critique of power (Waisbord 2020). Given that "the considerable political differences across nations are responsible for producing a diversity of reflections" in terms of journalistic practice and autonomy, studies that examine the "real problems journalists encounter while deciding on which news stories to work on or particular frames to publish" and the threats that they face in doing so are called for (Hamada 2022, 1730). Apart from political pressures, the volatile condition of any community (de Bustamante and Relly 2021) also impacts journalists' autonomy. González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) examined the resistance and resilience strategies employed by women journalists in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, highlighting how these journalists often spearheaded resistance initiatives. The forms of resistance employed included participating in extensive training, attending workshops focused on personal safety, and organizing protests to raise awareness about the perilous conditions faced by journalists in Mexico.

Hamada (2022) established that safety and autonomy are related concepts and argued that a threat to a journalist's safety was a threat to his or her autonomy, and vice versa. Importantly, journalists are facing increasing threats of violence and, accordingly, decreasing levels of autonomy across the globe (Bagdikian 2000; Di Salvo 2022; Hamada 2022; Harris, Mosdell and Griffiths 2016; Payne 2008). And the practice of journalism in digital contexts has only created new threats to journalists' safety, along with new forms of surveillance that have implications for the ways in which journalists practice (Di Salvo 2022). As Harlow (2021) argued, too often companies' digital policies "are focused on protecting the news companies' brands, readers, and sources, rather than protecting journalists (176). Examining the intersections of censorship, autonomy and safety in non-Western, digital contexts is thus of relevance.

Bangladesh and the DSA

Bangladesh, a former colony that is today considered a developing country, has had a robust media system since long before winning its independence from the British in 1971. Today, there are two leading state broadcasters, and a private media sector of 3,000 print media outlets, 30 radio stations, 30 TV channels, and several hundred digital platforms. But the country has fallen 17 places on the World Press Freedom

Index over the past five years, from 146th in 2017 to 163rd out of 180 countries in 2023. Bangladesh is now behind countries such as Cambodia, Russia, and Venezuela, and comes in last for all of South Asia with regards to press freedom. Importantly, this slippage coincides with the implementation of the DSA now names Cybersecurity Act.

The DSA restrains journalists from publishing stories that are critical of the government or politically affiliated individuals. This includes the so-called Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the war for independence in 1971 and was a former prime minister of the country, as well as members of Bangabandhu's family who have controlled the government since 2009. Importantly, the act also gives power to members of Bangabandhu's family, who are not in government positions, to respond to journalistic critique.

Attacks on journalists and their relatives have increased significantly since the implementation of the DSA (Hasan 2023). There are 20 punishable offenses included in the DSA, some of which are non-bailable and can result in life in prison (Mahmud 2018). The DSA gives government officials broad scope to determine if an action constitutes a punishable offense. Consequently, published critique of the government's actions or members is likely to result in a jail sentence or disappearance. As per the DSA officers of the rank of police inspector are empowered to search and arrest anyone without a warrant (Dhaka Tribune 2023). On March 10, 2020, renowned Bangladeshi journalist Shafiqul Islam, 'disappeared' (Ahmed 2020). The day before, a ruling party politician filed a case against him regarding a Facebook post in which he criticized the government's authoritarian attitudes. After 53 days he was 'found' by the police and is now in jail for seven years (Ahmed 2020). DSA has created an impediment to freedom of expression for journalists, doctors, health workers, lawyer, teachers, students, and human rights activists (Lenin 2021). The Bangladeshi non-profit The Center for Governance Studies carried out a survey in 2021 where they found that out of 4,500 cases filed under the Digital Security Act since its enactment in 2018 to 2021, about 28% of cases, or approximately 1,260, were against journalists (Chowdhury 2020). And most of the cases were filed by ruling partymen, their supporters, and government officials.

This marks an important shift with regards to media freedom and the practice of journalism in Bangladesh. A 2015 study found that in the previous four decades, an "enormous number of investigative reports" had been published in Bangladesh, encouraged in part by several national competitions and prizes (Rahman 2015, 1). This journalistic practice, along with a 2009 law outlining the right to information, was seen as important to Bangladesh's democratic development. But, while Bangladesh has technically been enjoying democracy since 1991, Riaz (2018) argued that it is now a democracy within an autocratic setting that has been ruled by a hybrid regime since 2014. And, as Riaz (2018) noted, journalists have faced many obstacles operating in this repressive environment. With the introduction of DSA in 2018, the government has formalized these obstacles, leading to an acceleration in the loss of media freedom and risks to journalists.

Accordingly, this study examines how digital journalists in Bangladesh perceive the threats of DSA 2018 to their autonomy and safety and the strategies that have developed in response to it. To that end, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do digital journalists in Bangladesh perceive the effects of the Digital Security Act 2018 as affecting their journalistic autonomy?

RQ2: What are their strategies for covering stories and relaying information that is sensitive to the government in the digital space?

Method

As a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews are helpful to explain and uncover complicated processes, patterns, and behaviors (Miles and Huberman 1994). Interviews are especially useful when the researcher's intention is to understand the subjects' motives (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). While every media house in Bangladesh ultimately publishes its content on digital platforms, this study is specifically interested in the strategies developed when publishing content directly to a digital environment, given that digital publishing is the focus of the DSA. Thus, interviews for this study were conducted with journalists who work directly for digital platforms. The researchers received approval from their Institutional Review Board prior to contacting potential participants for this study.

Participants were selected through a database created by Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU), the largest organization of reporters working for newspapers, television and radio, online portals, and news agencies in Bangladesh. Initially, 40 eligible journalists were contacted using email addresses received from DRU. In total, 17 journalists responded. Due to time constraints, two journalists were unable to participate. Ultimately, interviews were conducted with 15 Bangladeshi journalists working for digital media outlets. We contend that the number of participants is a) expected, given the safety concerns for journalists in Bangladesh, and b) a legitimate number of interviews from which to draw conclusions based on similar studies in the extant literature (Aitamurto 2016; Besley and Roberts 2010; Nishikawa et al. 2009) and based on the norms of qualitative research (Lindlof and Taylor 2019). All participants have worked as journalists in Bangladesh for at least 10 years. All interviews were conducted *via* Zoom from May to June of 2022, and lasted 35 min to one hour and 25 min, with a total of 769 min recorded. As Bangladesh is not an English-speaking country, interviews were conducted in Bengali to obtain richer and more accurate information. For precision, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Transcriptions were analyzed using Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (1995) approach to qualitative analysis, employing a 3-step process. The researchers used a manual, rather than computer-assisted, approach to coding the interview data (Tracy 2013). In step one, both researchers read the transcription in full while adding notes in the margins. Tracy (2013) refers to this as primary cycle coding, which helps to answer the question "what's going on here?". In the second step, researchers focused on identifying themes and patterns emergent in the data. In the third step, the researchers again focused on the emergent themes and patterns using the framework of the research questions. After completing the third step, the researchers discussed their individual themes and findings and came to a consensus.

Ensuring interviewees' safety is especially important given the risks faced by journalists in Bangladesh. As such, names of the outlets for which journalists work and

other information that could lead to identification is not included here. While the sample consists of both men and women working as journalists, all respondents are referred to as 'he' in this study. We can note that the participants work for a range of organizations, including well-respected, highly viewed, important national media portals. Each of the participants primarily cover issues of politics, transportation, city hall, education, crime, election commission, economy, and finance including issues such as bank, insurance, and the stock market.

Findings

Journalists' Perceptions of the DSA and Autonomy

The first research question in this study is concerned with the ways digital journalists in Bangladesh perceive the effects of the Digital Security Act 2018 on their journalistic autonomy. After careful analysis of the data, the following key themes emerged. First, the participants see professional autonomy as paramount to ensuring they can meet their professional obligations as journalists. Importantly, their conceptualization of autonomy and its importance to the practice of journalism mirrors the conceptualization of this term in the scholarly literature and journalism field in the West. Second, the participants communicated that the DSA presents a threat to journalists' professional autonomy specifically because it presents a threat to their personal freedom and safety.

Studies show that journalists are able to fulfill the normative responsibilities of journalism only if they have professional autonomy (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021; Perkins 2002; Urbániková 2021). While these studies have often concentrated on journalistic practice in the West, the participants in this study see this as the case in Bangladesh as well. Technically, in Bangladesh the right to free speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought are guaranteed in the country's constitution. However, journalists in Bangladesh described the idea of practicing journalism freely as 'imaginary thinking' and stated that this is a direct consequence of the DSA.

As a veteran journalist stated, "it is not the sole purpose of the journalists to stigmatize or dispute some specific group or people, but this is also not fair that we cannot write things freely." Interviewees stated that although they believe journalism is supposed to play the role of a 'watchdog,' they feel it is impossible in Bangladesh because of the degree to which the DSA has limited their 'freedom.' Another participant described the DSA as a 'neck hold' for journalism.

A participant described an incident in which a reporter and editor were harassed, and the reporter jailed for three days for claims made in a published story, despite there being supporting documents providing evidence for the claims. As the interviewee stated, such incidents make clear to journalists' that their professional autonomy and freedom of expression are at stake under the DSA:

> I have details of an incident in front of me and the report which may go against an influential person or a government official, and I am not being able to publish it outright. It creates a risk of being indicted under that Act [DSA]. In spite of having all the information and proof, I am worried to publish that news. The Act is creating a big obstacle to our freedom of expression.

Further, the process of information gathering to secure information and evidence has itself become increasingly challenging for journalists under the DSA. First, the act forbids them to enter the government offices with a digital device such as a mobile phone or laptop. If officials see a mobile device in the hands of a journalist, they can immediately implicate him under the DSA. This is especially problematic given that the ruling government's main theme is 'Digital Bangladesh.' Participants questioned how the country will create a 'Digital Bangladesh' for all if it forbids journalists from using their mobile devices to conduct their work. Additionally, under the DSA journalists need permission from a government authority to enter any government office. As interviewees noted, even if an official gives them permission, that official is subject to questioning by his superiors. Thus, according to one interviewee, "It is not only that I will be implicated, but my source will be implicated as well. If that official is punished, he will never help me anymore, it's a very chaotic situation now for the journalists."

According to the DSA, police do not need a warrant to arrest a journalist. And many of the charges under the act are non-bailable and could result in life imprisonment. As one participant who has worked in the media for nearly 25 years described, "Sometimes we don't know which information of the story would hurt powerful peoples' feelings. Police can come and arrest us anytime. The political situation in our country at present is that you will even not know who is arresting you and what is your offense." Participants noted that they are living and working in fear. One participant stated, "if you as a journalist publish a report and if a member of parliament thinks that it has hampered his dignity or honor, he can sue you. He would say that the report has been done to disgrace him. The very approach is a subjective interpretation of the law. This scope is wide in this law."

The interviews conducted here found that the law is more severe toward district-level journalists. In the capital, media houses try to use their power and resources to protect their reporters from the wrath of the government. But at the district level, correspondents do not have this additional resource behind them. As one journalist mentioned, "we in the capital are suffering, but the journalists of district towns are suffering more because nobody is holding an umbrella on their head, nobody will extend a supporting hand. You may tell them to do journalism fearlessly, but ultimately will they get the support?" Participants also noted that at the district level, police are 'helpless' and have no choice but to act at the behest of local government allies. Participants noted that if a local government-allied group says to district-level police that a certain report has offended the ruling government, the police cannot refuse to take the case. If the police disagree, "they will be transferred to a remote area" according to one participant.

The interviews conducted here made clear that columnists face the same challenges as reporters under the DSA. One participant stated, "even if you write a column, you might be arrested under this Act because of your opinion." The participants in this study see the DSA as a threat to their personal safety, and they see this threat to their safety as severely limiting their professional autonomy. Many of the participants noted that they feel a need to self-censor in order to avoid jail or harassment. One journalist mentioned:

> The act has created a dangerous situation where we have to be very cautious in doing news and writing headlines. We have lost freedom due to this Act. I think that there are attempts to control journalism through this Act. Journalists consider a hundred times before doing critical news against the government. Headlines and intro are done considering that it does not affect anybody.

One journalist described the situation as an autocratic political regime and stated, "I have never passed such a bad situation in my 30 years of journalism. You cannot write anything. Your hands are tied. You cannot even investigate the corruption of people close to the government."

Importantly, the DSA restrains the practice of journalism not only by targeting individual journalists, but also by creating situations in which the organization itself suffers. As one journalist noted:

> In our newspaper, we reported about a problem in the Information Minister's village home and our newspaper's website was blocked for a month. No government organization admitted to blocking the website, but we could understand why it happened. We were commercially affected in that one-month period as nobody could access our digital version.

After that incident, the participant and his organization became more aware of the realities of the DSA. Now before publishing stories that may be perceived as critical, they discuss at length the potential outcomes.

One participant's comment illustrates the broader theme found across interviews: the DSA has created a "prejudice about doing good journalism," which, as the participants in this study articulated, requires professional autonomy that allows for objective reporting. The participants believe that DSA limits their professional autonomy by creating threats to their personal safety and freedom. This has led participants to become more cautious and careful. At the same time, participants have developed various strategies in an attempt to reclaim their autonomy and continue practicing what they see as 'good journalism' despite the constraints of the DSA.

Journalists' Strategies

The second research question is concerned with journalists' strategies for covering stories and relaying information that can be seen as critical of the government in the digital space. Due to the DSA, journalists are unable to write traditional investigative or in-depth stories about corruption and mismanagement. However, the 15 journalists who participated in this study provided a range of strategies they use in an effort to reclaim their autonomy and deliver objective journalism relevant to the public. We refer to this collection of strategies using the term 'defensive journalism' (DJ).

We see DJ as a concept that expands our framework for understanding how journalists operate in authoritarian contexts. Importantly, DJ builds from the scholarly concept of self-censorship. As detailed previously, self-censorship is conceptualized as a practice utilized by journalists to protect themselves from harassment and/or curry reward or favor from authorities (Lee 1998). Lee's (1998) conceptualization captures the "editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of

emphasis to a choice of rhetorical devices" that may be used to either avoid punishment or gain favor (52). But it tells us little about the additional counterstrategies journalists might use to actively publish critical information while working to mitigate potential personal harm. Key for the participants in our study are the specific strategies they use as a *defensive tool* to actively address the impacts of the DSA in order to reclaim a degree of professional autonomy and perform what they see as their journalistic responsibilities. Both self-censorship and DJ are used to defend journalists from harm, however, DJ is conceptualized to broaden our understanding of the strategies journalists use to continue their work while in a defensive mode (Cheruiyot 2024). In the context of Bangladesh, these strategies include securing hard copies of documents, obtaining photographic and video evidence; recording conversations; securing comments from high-level sources; using cartoons or abstractions; 'punching' information into adjacent stories; using international media sources; reframing headlines and stories; and saving critical information for later in story copy, even when it is most relevant to the story. These strategies are further explained below (Table 1).

The journalists interviewed referred to the importance of having secured hard copies of all relevant documents before publishing a story. As described by one interviewee, "I don't write a story if I don't have all the documents in my hand." One journalist noted that previously if he had information from a reliable source with a partial document, he went forward with publication. However, now he has to make sure that he has secured hard copies of all relevant documents and quotes from every single person the story concerns, rather than only key individuals, before publication. As the journalist stated, "The whole process is different now. Nowadays, I can produce only one in-depth story, maybe, once in a month, but I always make sure that I am safe, and my organization is safe. The satisfaction is that still, I am doing journalism for the people."

Before the enactment of DSA, journalists noted that they could rely on a photograph of a document and their sources sometimes sent them a picture of a document *via* WhatsApp or Messenger. But now they believe it is necessary to secure hard copies of all documents. They call their sources for appointments to obtain these printed documents, which sometimes takes three days to a week, and only after obtaining photocopies of the documents do they go forward in publishing the story. However, obtaining photocopies of the documents presents its own risk for the journalist and the source. As one interviewee stated, "I take the photocopy only when I feel very safe that nobody is watching and only my source is there." Under DSA, making a photocopy of a document is listed as a major offense. But investigative journalism and in-depth reporting requires, as noted by an interviewee, "gathering documents and analyzing them in a proper manner." So, to fulfill the duties of their journalistic practice, they must find ways to secure such documents despite the threat.

Some journalists have also taken to recording every conversation with their sources. As one interviewee stated, "I record everything so that it can save me if I am in jeopardy. Sometimes I tell them, sometimes I don't. But after DSA 2018 it has now become mandatory for us reporters. I am doing it just to protect myself. I don't use the conversation for my reporting." The journalist noted that he is aware that recording a conversation without permission is not acceptable, but doing so allows him to report critical stories while protecting himself from the consequences of the DSA.

Table 1. Defensive journalism strategies used by Bangladeshi digital journalists.

Securing hard copies of documents	Journalists try to secure every possible document (charts, official ministry decision's or press releases, etc.) related to the news and keep it as a safeguard.
Obtaining photographic and video evidence	Journalists take still photos and videos related to the story, even when they do not expect them to be published. For example, if a journalist is writing a story related to a public issue, he acquires related still photos and video for further evidence.
Recording conversations	While interviewing sources or covering press conferences journalists record conversations in their entirety to prevent accusations by authorities of false claims.
Securing comments from high-level sources	While writing or covering any sensitive issue, journalists try to include one or two interviews of high-level officials in the story.
Using cartoons or abstractions	If journalists cannot write or publish the information directly, they use cartoons to portray the situation in the abstract.
'Punching' information into adjacent stories	If journalists cannot publish critical information in a specific story, they wait and insert the information in other related stories.
Using international media sources	To support their stories, journalists use international news sources such as BBC, New York Times, etc., where possible.
Reframing headlines and stories	Journalists avoid using 'hard' words or direct conviction in headlines and stories. Rather they use 'soft' words and modify tones.
Saving critical information for later	Journalists include critical information in the middle or at the end of a story, rather than the beginning of the story as normally presented when following the inverted pyramid approach to news writing.

Journalists have also prioritized obtaining photographic and/or video evidence to support their stories. One journalist provided the following example:

> There was corruption in purchasing railway coaches somewhere in the country. In that case, we tried to make use of our local correspondent. So, he goes and sees that the coaches are lying idle and collects the real picture. We included videos with the story. The Minister said that no, no, the coaches are in use. But the video proves that the coaches are lying idle somewhere in a station. We leave it to the readers to decide. Previously we used to just say that this has happened, but now we have to go to the spot and show the proof to the public.

Since the passing of the DSA, participants no longer believe it is enough to rely on sources' accounts of information. Now, they see securing evidence in the form of hard copies of documents, recording conversations with sources, and obtaining photographic and video evidence as necessary to protect themselves when publishing reports on government officials and government activity.

Moreover, the journalists noted that whom they look to as a source for comments has shifted in response to DSA. Journalists noted that it is now important to secure comments from a top-level official rather than a mid-level officer. Previously, a journalist could effectively rely on comments from mid-level officials or public relations officers' statements. Now, it is necessary to secure comments from sources at the rank of 'minister, secretary, or director general', and no less than that, as including comments from such high-level officials creates a form of protection for the journalist.

Including direct transcriptions of government officials' statements has also become an important strategy. For instance, one journalist described a recent incident in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave a statement in parliament about opposition leader Khaleda Zia and Noble laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus. The journalist knew that it would not be possible for him to report on or criticize the prime minister's statements directly as she would deny what she had said, and he would face

retribution. Instead, he included the reporting on her statement by the state-owned media agency, an outlet which is unequivocally supportive of the prime minister; then he used a cartoon depicting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the top of the Padma bridge watching Khaleda Zia and Dr. Yunus desperately trying to swim in the water beneath, to illustrate her comments about the opposition leader and Noble Laureate without having to describe her comments directly; and finally, he attached a complete transcription of a video clip of the Prime Minister's statement in parliament so that she could not deny her statement nor claim the media had misrepresented it. As the participant noted, the affordances offered by publication on a digital platform were pertinent to being able to employ these strategies:

> This was possible only due to digital journalism. This adding at the end [or ability to add and update content] is a pertinent point because you will find that this is the only matter of discussion for the last two days, only discussion in social media. And our cartoon has also been much discussed. The addition at the end totally changed the report.

For some sensitive stories, participants rely on reporting from international news agencies such as BBC, Al-Jazeera, etc. As an example, one participant mentioned the 2021 reports of corruption of the then Army Chief. The Inter Services Public Relations of the Army refused to comment on the issue and no local media was publishing on it. In an effort to inform the public while protecting himself, the participant used Al-Jazeera as his source and wrote the story based on the larger outlet's reporting. Whether adopting such an approach is valuable, given that it does not add additional information to the story, is debatable. But the argument given by the participant was that it is better to ensure the local audience receives some information rather than no information at all.

Participants have also taken to not including the name of the specific person they are reporting on in their published stories. Rather they portray the character of the person in such a way that the reader can understand whom they are talking about. One participant provided an example of a powerful relative of the ruling party who engaged in corruption to support his political interests. In his reporting, the participant detailed his wrongdoing and corruption without mentioning the perpetrator's name. According to the participant:

> Our motto is to inform people. At first, we acquired all the documents and later wrote the story in a way that we did not mention his name. We are sure that our readers understood whom we were talking about. In that way, we published the story but also tried to save ourselves from the Act.

Importantly, a media organization may decide to 'kill' a story that is critical of the government because of concerns around the DSA, even when journalists have obtained hard evidence and wish to publish the story. A participant described his strategy to getting the information out in such instances:

> I am working in the media for the last 17 years. Still now, if my news is killed, it makes me sad. However, I remember catching hold of this story sometime later. When I get a chance, I punch the vital information of the killed news in some other related news. That information may not make the headlines or become the lead of the story, but it is punched inside a related news. This I have been doing for a long time. Every reporter does that. But I never do it unethically, never to harass anybody intentionally.

Some participants also refer to adopting a new storyline or angle to publish the story so that it does not get killed. One participant, who has been working as a reporter for the last 18 years and in a digital-only platform for the last five years, noted that he tries to find out one positive angle in every critical story. He then writes the story in a positive tone, but includes the critical information. While he may not be able to include critical or sensitive information in the headline or lede, he brings it into the copy. In the introduction, he may change the traditional pattern of reporting by not including the most pertinent information first; but by including it later in the story, he ultimately provides all relevant details for the reader. The journalist's statement below clearly encapsulates the idea of 'defensive journalism' as an approach that allows journalists to reclaim their autonomy and disseminate as much information as possible while protecting their safety and ability to publish:

> You know the job of the news media is to give news. What we are doing is changing the manner of expression, changing the language, and not hitting, or blaming directly. It reduces the risk of falling under the legal process. I am adopting a neutral way of publishing the information by changing the manner of expression, and changing the language, and story tone. We journalists are defensive. Because surviving is also a big thing. If there is an adverse situation, we think that we have to survive first. If we can survive, we may be able to turn around someday. Between surviving and turning around we have to adopt a moderate approach.

Importantly, some participants interviewed for this study reported taking a traditional 'self-censorship' approach that relies on avoidance and omission in response to the DSA. For example, a journalist stated with regards to publishing stories critical of the government, "We try not to do any such news. We just avoid such news. Consciously avoid them." When pressed further and asked if he and his media organization attempt to cover such stories using similar strategies reported by other interviewees, he responded "No. It is not possible in [my outlet]…I avoid it altogether. And our organization is directly supervised by the intelligence agencies. Nobody of this organization even tries it."

Discussion

The findings presented here add to the literature in several important ways. First, they illustrate that participants see the practice of journalism as playing the role of 'watchdog' in society with an obligation to deliver information, including information that is critical of the government, to the public. Second, they illustrate that journalists in Bangladesh understand the concept of professional autonomy as it is presented in the extant literature, and that they see autonomy as pertinent to the practice of journalism, specifically in fulfilling journalism's watchdog function. Third, they confirm Hamada's (2022) findings about the interrelated nature of safety and autonomy. And finally, they give us new insight into the practice of journalism in authoritarian contexts and allow us to build from the concept of self-censorship to develop the concept of 'defensive journalism'.

Hamada (2022) argued that safety and autonomy are interrelated concepts. The findings in this study around journalists perceptions of DSA and its impacts support Hamada's (2022) work, as journalists noted that the threats to safety in the form of potential jail time, harassment or disappearance, as posed by DSA have resulted in perceptions of lower levels of professional autonomy for journalists in Bangladesh.

Further, journalists see this decrease in autonomy as a barrier to fulfilling what they perceive to be their professional duties as they feel they are less free to produce 'good journalism,' which holds power to account and disseminates all relevant information to the public. As Hamada (2022) noted, levels and perceptions of professional autonomy are important to the normative practice of journalism. The relevance of these concepts to the practice of journalism has been most thoroughly explored in the context of Western, democratic societies with relatively high levels of media freedom. This study illustrates that autonomy and its associated values are also seen as critical to the practice of journalism in the context of Bangladesh; and that safety and autonomy are seen as interrelated concepts in that context as well.

District-level journalists often face greater challenges than those working in the capital in Bangladesh, a situation comparable to what González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) discovered in Mexico. They found that journalists living in rapidly changing war zones, for which they had not received adequate training, faced significant difficulties. In the context of Bangladesh, interview data reveals that district-level journalists often lack education and are not well-versed in strategizing around situations related to the DSA. Consequently, district-level journalists in Bangladesh frequently refrain from publishing critical information or stories as they too easily become primary targets of local authorities.

As research from Kim and Shin (2022) and Bradshaw (2017) has shown, when under threat of censorship, journalists may willingly suppress sensitive information and adopt a strategy of 'self-censorship' to prevent harm or harassment. While self-censorship is an important term and one that is related to DJ, we argue that it doesn't adequately leave space for conceptualizing the various counterstrategies journalists use to actively publish information, while also protecting themselves, in authoritarian or other oppressive contexts. In the case of Bangladesh, we found that digital journalists are developing a range of counterstrategies that allow them to actively disseminate sensitive information to the fullest extent possible in an effort to reclaim professional autonomy and fulfill what they perceive to be their journalistic obligations. As one participant referred to such strategies, they are "a sort of trick to disseminate information." Importantly, the participants report doing so because of their belief in the normative role of journalism as a 'watchdog' function that must report critical information to the public.

As illustrated in the findings, journalists are adopting a range of strategies to achieve this, including securing hard copies of all documents; using only high-level sources to protect their credibility; adding video clips and photographs to their stories as irrefutable evidence of corruption; using cartoons or avoiding the inclusion of names so that they can claim they are not referring to any specific official; pointing to international reporting rather than developing their own; and adding critical information into other less critical stories. Importantly, some of these practices are available only within a digital context, which allows journalists to update and change information rapidly, and include video and photographic evidence more easily. Additionally, some of these practices, such as obtaining hard copies of documents, including video and photo evidence, and using more robust sources and ample quotes, may lead to stronger journalistic practices, despite the context.

The journalists who participated in this study noted that they are still 'doing journalism instead of not doing anything,' despite the limitations presented by the DSA.

From their statements, it is clear they attach the normative concepts of autonomy, objectivity, and social responsibility to the practice of journalism in ways that mirror these concepts in the literature. They see 'good journalism' as playing a 'watchdog' function and believe producing such work requires professional autonomy. As such, they are willing to devise strategies to continue its practice, despite the threats to their safety presented by DSA. As one interviewee stated:

> It is not that we are always abstaining from publishing such information. We do publish the information in a little different manner. We keep the Digital Security Act in our heads. We talk, we discuss it. But we still…get the information for our report.

We argue the findings presented here are distinct from research that focuses on the use of self-censorship in response to anti-press laws, government influence or legal issues. The practice of self-censorship inhibits normative journalistic practices including objectivity (Bradshaw 2017; Kim and Shin 2022). And, as researchers have argued, objective journalism is necessary to the project of democracy as it disseminates critical information to the public (Henrichsen 2020; McNair 2009; McQuail 2010). In Bangladesh, journalists demonstrate that they are working to uphold the public interest through the practice of a collection of strategies we refer to as 'defensive journalism'. Using these strategies, journalists are sidestepping self-censorship and fighting against government influence in order to deliver sensitive news to the audience. In this way they are able to save themselves from the drastic consequences of the law, while also practicing accountable journalism.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on the conceptualization and practice of journalism outside of Western contexts broadly, and within an authoritarian setting specifically. Bangladesh is a developing country and former colony of the British empire, and there is little extant research that analyzes journalistic norms there. The DSA 2018 has allowed the government to use emerging cyber-security threats as an opportunity to censor any and all digital publication of information critical of the government. In response to the threats presented by DSA, digital journalists have developed a range of strategies to effectively disseminate critical information to the public while also avoiding having their stories or, in the worst-case scenario, themselves killed. While some participants interviewed here simply avoid reporting on such content, others documented the creative strategies they have developed to ensure they are able to fulfill what they see as their duty as a journalist—to disseminate information, whether critical of the government or not, to the public. Further, it is clear from this study that journalistic practice in a digital environment creates new threats for harm as well as opportunities to use new digital methods for strategically disseminating information in authoritarian contexts.

This study argues that the term self-censorship does not leave adequate space for conceptualizing the range of counterstrategies journalists use to fulfill their professional responsibilities in authoritarian or repressive contexts. As such, we offer 'defensive journalism' as a way to build on the concept of self-censorship and capture the myriad strategies journalists use to publish information in difficult contexts. Given the growing

attacks on democratic systems, rising distrust in the media, and attacks on journalists worldwide, understanding how journalists respond to external pressures and perceive the importance and purpose of their work as social actors is increasingly relevant.

This study is limited with regards to scope and context. Obtaining more interviews from journalists working in Bangladesh would likely present additional strategies. However, these 15 interviews allow us to begin an important conversation about doing journalism in an adversarial situation. Additional studies of the perceptions and practices of journalists in other adversarial contexts will be important. While work has been done in contexts such as Russia, Venezuela, and Colombia to detail practices of self-censorship and the counterstrategies journalists employ, research on the specificities of such practice in other contexts is necessary as journalists face increasing threats to their work and their safety around the globe.

Note

1. This research was conducted before the Digital Security Act was renamed to the Cybersecurity Act 2023. As such, the study will refer the Digital Security Act (DSA) throughout.

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