JOURNAL OF ELT AND EDUCATION
ISSN: 2618-1290 (Print), 2663-1482 (Online), Volume 03, January-December 2020, Page: 124-134
Published by, Hello-Teen Society & Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD)

Received: 26/09/2020 Accepted: 01/11/2020 Published: 02/11/2020

Newspapers of Bangladesh in the Digital Age: Strategies and Applications

Research Paper

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[**Citation:** Islam, K. M. A., & Ahsan, A. (2020). Newspapers of Bangladesh in the Digital Age: Strategies and Applications. *Journal of ELT and Education*, *3*(4): 124-134. Retrieved from https://jee-bd.com/journal/34172020]

Abstract

Technologies are posing numerous challenges to the newspaper industry around the world by exploring digital platforms and changing the reading habits of audiences living in the digital age. The challenges are putting impacts on the circulations and revenues of newspapers that are causing readership and economic loss. To survive in this age, the newspaper industries around the world are adopting several strategies to meet the challenges and cope up with the technological changes. The study aims to examine the types of strategies of Bangladeshi newspapers and the extent of their applications to see how the newspapers are surviving. Based on purposive sampling, the study selects *Bangladesh Protidin, Prothom Alo, Kaler Kantha,* and *Samakal,* the most popular Bengali dailies in Bangladesh. Based on the in-depth interviews (IDI) and the content analysis, the results reveal that several strategies such as creating online versions, use of social media, working with integrated newsrooms, and so on have been planned but yet to be properly applied in the newspapers in full swing. The study explores the lack of focus and emphasis on the executions of the strategies due to numerous causes including the economic crisis, lack of human resources, social limitations, and the scarcity of supports and time. The study shows that the newspapers lack the dedicated procedure to measure the effectiveness of the strategies, and are still following the traditional methods that show the weak stand to cope up with the technological changes and ever-changing reading habits of the audience. Furthermore, the findings reveal an unparalleled economic base among the newspapers that have created a monopolist and imbalanced media market in the country. The study concludes by emphasizing on the coordinated initiatives of the government, journalists, and media owners for the survival of print newspapers of Bangladesh in the digital age.

Keywords: Newspaper, strategy, technology, readability, citizen journalism

1. Introduction

A newspaper is considered as the reservoir of history that places the accounts of events happening regularly in society including politics, culture, and so on. Hamilton (1992) observed that a newspaper is the first medium to place the regular activities of human beings in the pages of history that can impact the politics and public lives (cited in Amadu et al., 2018, p. 108). Apart

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from this, a newspaper is still considered as a credible medium due to the concerns over accuracy, reliability, and so on of the online news media (Salman et al., 2011, p. 8). This is because a newspaper can consume enough time to do a cross-check for any information whereas other digital media have less opportunity due to its characteristic of immediate news publications. However, digital media have posed a lot of threats to the existence of newspapers. With the expansion of the internet, people nowadays can get any information immediately by going through smartphones and social media. Simultaneously, since there is the advantage of distributing news contents immediately with video, audio, etc. in online media, people, particularly the youth prefer to browse news stories on the digital platforms. In consequence, the changing habits are leading newspapers to the decline of circulations gradually. As the readers are decreasing, the advertisers are also shifting their business from traditional to digital media. Tavares (2019) mentioned that the newspaper circulations decreased rapidly from 63 million to 31 million in the USA since the end of the 1980s. The overall picture of the United Kingdom newspapers showed that the newspaper's circulation decreased by 28% (Thomas, 2018). To overcome the economic crisis, newspapers like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal went on online subscriptions. In Bangladesh, the adverse situation is no different. According to the Film and Publication Department (FPD, 2020) of the Information Ministry of Bangladesh published on 16 June 2020, 552 newspapers are being published in Bangladesh whereas 254 are published from Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, and 298 are from outside of the capital. Though the report claimed that the circulation of newspapers is on the rise, Islam (2020), denying the claim, asserted that the circulation has been going down rapidly for the last several years due to the explosion of online media.

Islam (2020) further mentioned the speech of Matiur Rahman, the editor of *Prothom Alo,* the most popular Bengali daily of Bangladesh, as saying that newspapers' readers are decreasing at a rate of 5 to 10 percent every year that led to the economic downturn by declining revenue of newspapers. Besides, Mahmud (2009) argued that the newspaper industry of Bangladesh is facing a lot of challenges and obstacles such as the closure of numerous newspapers, losing jobs, decreasing salaries, and so on at the time of online explosions. The statistics also show the rapid expansion of the internet, mobile users, and social media consumers in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the number of internet subscribers has been 103.476 million by June 2020. Till the same period, mobile subscribers reached 163 million, and social media users reached 5 million in Bangladesh (BTRC, 2020). Thus, the news providers have shifted to numerous digital platforms to distribute news stories to people that generated several news portals. More than eight thousand news portals applied for registration to the information ministry of Bangladesh (bdnews24.com, 2019). So, the impact of technologies on the newspapers industry in Bangladesh is being evident gradually.

In this context, scholars and media professionals are concerned about whether technologies will declare the death of newspapers or not. However, they asserted that the newspaper industry must adopt new strategies to meet the challenges and cope up with the technological changes. In several countries, the newspaper industries started devising new strategies on contents and business models as survival strategies. Based on this assertion, the study aimed to examine what types of strategies the newspaper industry of Bangladesh is taking and how those strategies are being applied. The study also has paid attention to how the industries measure the effectiveness of the strategies and to what extent the strategies are being applied in the newspapers.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of the 'Mediamorphosis Theory' first coined by Roger Fidler in 1990 (Loop, 1998) is the theoretical foundation of the study. According to the theory, the new media do not declare

the death of old or traditional media; rather the old media expand and evolve with new media for better performance (Ahmad & Jimoh, no date, p. 15).

However, Fidler explained the concept of his theory by six principles such as Coevolution and Coexistence, Metamorphosis, Propagation, Survival, Opportunity & Need, and Delayed Adoption (Tomasello, Lee & Baer, 2010, p. 532-533).

Coevolution and coexistence refer to the existence of all media staying together in society by influencing each other. Metamorphosis indicates that the new media emerge from the existing media which is facilitated by the new media to cope up with the changes. *Propagation* indicates the adoption of new media with supreme characteristics of old media that are disseminated to the public through communication. *Survival* refers to the adoption of old media with the characteristics of new media to survive. The principle of *opportunity and need* indicates that the success of innovation such as new media depend on the social, political, and economic conditions of a society. *Delayed adoption* indicates that old media take a long time to cope-up with new media as new media delay to become successful in an existing society (Ahmad & Jimoh, n. d., p. 15-16; Tomasello et al., 2010, p. 533).

According to Alves (2011), the six principles of the theory can explain the success and failure of media along with analysis on the experience of journalists gathered while coping up with the changing environment due to technology (cited in Tomasello et al., 2010, p. 533). The first five principles of Fidler's (1997) theory are directly relevant to the objectives of the present study as it aimed to examine how the newspapers of Bangladesh are planning strategies to cope up with the changing environment that new media generated, and how successfully the newspapers are executing those strategies.

3. Literature Review

The impact of technologies on the circulations and readership of newspapers holds different results among different studies. The results vary from country to country though there are few research works conducted in Bangladesh. The variables such as social and economic conditions, levels of educations, etc. differ that influence differently to the results of the studies. Based on the concept of the 'Mediamorphosis Theory', Jimoh and Ahmad (n. d.) conducted a study on *Punch* and *Daily trust*, two Nigerian newspapers, to see how the newspapers were surviving in the age of the internet. The results showed that the revenue of the newspapers increased by operating the online versions of the newspapers in a consequence of response to the explosion of new media in the country.

Salami & Seamans (2014) found positive relations between internet penetration and newspaper readership in their study on the impact of the internet on newspaper readability. They found that the content of the newspaper has been much more improved as a response to the internet penetrations. This result is opposite to the hypothesis that the internet is spoiling the quality of newspapers' contents (Salami & Seamans, 2014).

However, the scenario is different in other countries as Amadu et al. (2018) found proof of the gradual decline of the newspaper's circulations in Northern Ghana. Their study examined the impact of internet-based news websites on the circulations of *Daily Graphic, Daily Guide, Ghanaian Times,* and *Business and Financial Times*, published from the northern regional capital of Ghana, Tamal. The results revealed that the news websites are leading to the decline in circulations and readership of newspapers, though the readers considered the newspapers as the most believable sources of information.

Moreover, Tewari (2016) surveyed 3,183 online newspaper readers to examine the impact of online media on the readership of newspapers in India. Though the results showed that 90% of participants still read print newspapers, the newspaper's readership is declining gradually among the youth. Sinyangwe and Phiri (2017) found the same result in their study on the Zambia Daily

Mail, a state-run newspaper of Zambia, to examine the impact of online newspapers (e-paper) on the print newspapers. The study showed that the online newspapers could not pose threats to the circulation of newspapers in a pervasive way yet since both are being read in the country simultaneously. However, the popularity of technologies and literacy levels are going up among citizens that is extending the scope of the online newspapers in the country.

In a study on 109 people of the USA, Everett (2011) found that 61.1% of participants think that newspapers will lose popularity in the next ten years while 22.2% said that newspapers will not survive at all. The reason behind this assertion is the use of electronic devices by most of the participants (58.7%). The results emphasized that the newspapers must adopt new technologies to cope up with the changing environment of readership (Everett, 2011, p. 110).

In another study, Nkomo, Kandiro and Bigirimana (2017) stated about the factors for motivating the readers to shift to online media from print newspapers and to examine the impact of those factors on newspaper revenue in the newspapers industry of Zimbabwe. Based on a survey of 400 respondents and in-depth interview with four advertising agencies, the study found that eight factors such as age, gender, computer literacy, cost, real-time reporting and interactivity, internet availability and cost, coping up with online payment methods and smartphone use played a significant role in readers' shifting from newspapers to online. However, this migration could not influence the newspaper's revenue in a very pervasive way. Nkomo et al. (2017, p. 58) concluded that newspapers must create online versions, integrate local news stories, restructure the newspaper organogram and use other platforms to disseminate the news as strategies for their survival in the digital ages.

4. Methodology

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Based on the purposive sampling, *Bangladesh Protidin, Prothom Alo, Kaler Kantha,* and *Samakal*, the most popular of Bengali dailies in Bangladesh were selected for the study. According to the Film and Publication Department (2020) of the Information Ministry of Bangladesh, these newspapers grab the position from the first to the forth respectively in terms of the numbers of circulations. To understand the strategies and the procedure of measuring effectiveness, the study conducted in-depth interview (IDI) with four journalists who hold the managerial and editorial posts in the sampled newspapers. To protect their professional safety, the study did not mention their names. An in-depth interview is conducted to analyze the thoughts and behavior in details that works as a support to other methods of a study (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3; Brouneus, 2011, p. 131). Thus, a total of 18 written questions comprising the challenges, strategies, and measurements were submitted to the journalists that were prepared based on the present condition of newspapers worldwide mentioned in the introduction section. Notwithstanding, a few additional questions were also asked based on the answers of the interviewee to have more detailed insights. To see how the strategies are being applied in the sampled newspapers, the study went through the analysis of the contents published from 1 January 2019 to 31 April 2019. The data were collected based on the themes that the journalists described as strategies at the time of the in-depth interview. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) mentioned that content analysis is conducted to analyze the written or recorded messages, information, etc. to scrutinize the patterns, biases, and so on, of a material subject constructively.

5. Results and Analyses

Before describing the strategies, the interviewee identified five challenges the newspapers are facing in the digital age. Those are the decline of circulation, the reluctance of advertisers, the lack of availability of new content, the challenge of immediacy, and the changing pattern of readers' taste. These challenges are interrelated in a way that a change in any factor brought changes to

others. According to the interviewees, technological advancements created numerous online news platforms where news stories are uploaded immediately. Consequently, readers are getting news content from these platforms that they want through using smartphones at any time at any place. This phenomenon has changed the reading habits that are leading the readers, particularly, the youth to be tilted to the online platform rather than to traditional media like newspapers. The availability of immediate news stories and easiness of their consumption in digital platforms generated the scarcity of content with new elements and angles for the print newspapers. These conditions prompted the newspaper circulations to be declined continuously. As a result, the advertisers are shifting their focus from newspapers to digital media that is posing an economic crisis to the newspapers industry.

5.1. Strategies to Meet the Challenges

Despite all of the challenges, the interviewee expressed a strong belief that newspapers will not die with the gradual expansion of digital platforms. Because newspapers have documentary values that hold the attention of readers always. On the other hand, history prevails that new invention does not necessitate the disappearance of old inventions. The interviewee opined that when private TV channels appeared it was assumed that newspapers would not exist anymore, but it did not happen. Along with this historical ground, the interviewee said that proper strategies and their meticulous applications can ensure the sustainability of newspapers. From this perspective, the interviewee described seven strategies and said that they are trying to utilize those strategies in newspapers to survive. The description of the strategies is given below:

Online Version: The interviewee said that they created online versions of their newspapers as the first strategy to cope up with the technological changes. According to the interviewee, this strategy attracts the readers to buy newspapers as the journalist of *Prothom Alo* mentioned,

> *Readers read the news stories in online version mostly. They also buy newspapers. Thus, we are emphasizing on the online version.*

Besides, a reader consumes the news stories through a smartphone, the online versions of the newspapers facilitate them to read the newspaper through electronic devices. Apart from uploading `e-paper', the interviewee said that they are also publishing distinctive news contents, particularly for the online news portals.

Integrated Newsroom: As the newspaper's authority is running print and online versions together, they are thinking of integrated newsroom for both platforms as one of the modern strategies. All of the sampled newspapers have online news portals which have dedicated team to run. The interviewee said that they took the strategy to integrate both the print and online versions under the umbrella of a coordinated editing panel which will edit, coordinate, and distribute news contents among news platforms.

Using QR Code: QR is the abbreviated form of Quick Response which contains information hidden in a content to be shown after scanning **(**Lin, 2009). Nowadays, the QR code is being used in some of the print news stories for visualization. The code contains a video of a particular story. When readers will read the story and scan the Code through the smartphone's application, the video will appear. The interviewee said that the QR code is being used in a response to the increasing interest of readers to watch videos. The journalist of *Prothom Alo* explained as saying,

> *The QR code is being used because readers desire to watch the video. The code eased the processes.*

Emphasis on Special Story: Special stories include investigative, in-depth, analytical stories beyond daily event stories. As all of the daily events are covered by the online news portals immediately as mentioned earlier, less remained for the newspapers. Thus, different news stories

should be published in newspapers to attract readers to read news stories. Based on this importance, the interviewee said that they are emphasizing on increasing special stories on different issues of the country. The journalist of *Bangladesh Protidin* mentioned as saying:

> *We have two goals; one of them is to sustain the circulation and the other, to increase it. To publish the special story is one of the strategies we are following. Thus, we are emphasizing on special contents.*

However, the task is not as easy as it is thought due to a lot of obstacles and limitations as the interviewee uttered. The interviewee said that they are to face social limitations while covering special stories, particularly investigative ones. Apart from this, lack of time and resources does not allow them to make special stories in expected ways.

Integration of Citizen Journalism: Citizen Journalism wears a pervasive look in association with the expansion of social media. Because of its popularity, the mainstream media is tilting to the stories created by citizens of a society. The interviewee said that they place the citizen stories in newspapers to survive. The journalist of *Bangladesh Protidin* mentioned,

> *I think, it is necessary to integrate citizen journalism in newspapers for the sake of survival. Because a reader can get a story of a locality in the newspaper that can motivate him/her to buy the newspaper.*

However, the interviewee described that fake news may appear in the appearance of citizen journalism. Thus, they publish citizen stories after a rigorous cross-checking process.

Using Social Media: All of the sampled newspapers have social media accounts where their news stories are being uploaded on regular basis. According to the interviewee, Facebook not only disseminates news stories but also promotes news platforms as well. The interviewee said that they use social media as a source of news stories also.

Using Infographic: To make a print news story visual, an infographic is being used in a news story as another major strategy as the interviewee said. The advantage of the infographic is numerous. It makes a news story easy to understand for all types of readers, even, with minimum literacy. However, the journalists of *Bangladesh Protidin* and *Kaler Kantha* said that they use infographics but not much as it should be because of the scarcity of planning, money, and time.

5.2. Process of Measuring the Effectiveness of the Strategies

It is important to measure the effectiveness of a strategy after it is applied. The interviewee mentioned numerous ways to check the effectiveness. The interviewee said that they arrange a regular and weekly meeting to discuss the overall activities of the newspapers. There, they discuss the effectiveness of the strategies they took and applied in newspapers.

Apart from this, the journalists of *Prothom Alo* and *Bangladesh Protidin* said that they analyzed the participations and behaviors of readers centering news stories through the analytics of online versions. The journalist of *Samakal* said that they evaluate the news stories monthly. They motivate their journalists by offering the best reports awards every month.

However, the journalist of *Prothom Alo* mentioned having a team whose responsibility is to observe the effectiveness of the strategies. However, the team is not dedicated and formal.

5.3. Applications of the Strategies in Newspapers

The study went through content analysis of the newspapers to examine the executions of the strategies the interviewee mentioned. In this study, strategies such as keeping online versions, integrated newsroom, and using social media were analyzed qualitatively while the remaining ones were discussed quantitatively. It was found that all of the sampled newspapers have online versions. They upload not only the `e-paper' but also other distinctive news stories for the online

news portals. But, the newspapers except *Prothom Alo* run the news portal with very limited teams. Additionally, the news portals of those news portals do not have any formal and professional organogram. Moreover, the three newspapers could not execute the integrated newsroom yet, though *Prothom Alo* started following this strategy, but is still at the beginning stage. In terms of the applications of these strategies, *Prothom Alo* is also ahead of using social media. Though all of the newspapers have social media accounts, *Prothom Alo* ranks the highest among others with almost 15 million subscriptions whereas *Kaler Kantha* is with 7 million, *Samakal* with 1.8 million, and *Bangladesh Protidin* with 1.5 million subscriptions as of 1 January 2020. It suggests that *Prothom Alo* is more vibrant on social media than other newspapers.

It was found in a quantitative content analysis that all of the sampled newspapers published 49, 253 news contents in four months. In terms of quantity of publishing news contents, *Samakal* ranked the highest with 13, 993 whereas *Kaler Kantha, Prothom Alo,* and *Bangladesh Protidin* grabbed the consecutive positions with 13,153, 12,031, and 10,076 news contents respectively. Based on the quantity of the news contents, the quantitative analysis of the remaining four strategies has been depicted below in figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The percentage was calculated based on the numbers of news stories.

5.3.1. Frequency of Special Reports

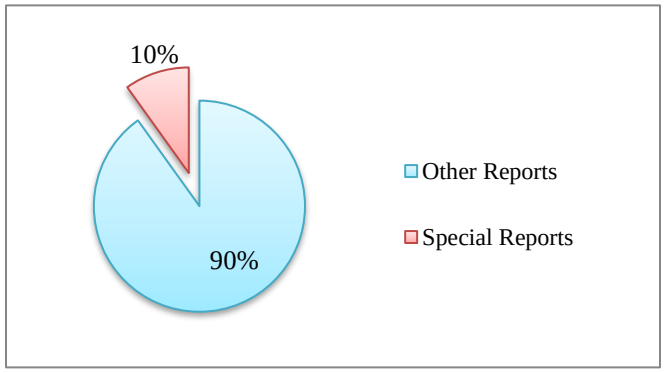


Figure 1. Frequency of Total Special Stories

The figure-1 shows that the frequency of using special reports in the sampled newspapers is very low. Among 49,253 contents, there were only 10% (5069) special reports published in the newspapers.

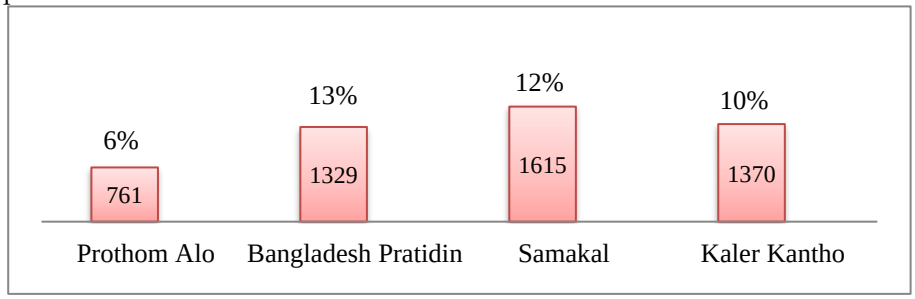


Figure 2. Newspaper Based Special Story

In terms of newspaper-based analysis, the figure-2 shows that *Bangladesh Protidin* published the highest special reports (13%) whereas *Samakal* published 12% and *Kaler Kantha* published 10% special news stories. The lowest frequency lied with *Prothom Alo* (6%).

5.3.2. Integrating Citizen Journalism

The results of the study show that the sampled newspapers put less emphasis on citizen journalism. The figure-3 shows that among total contents, the newspapers published only 1.62% of stories covered by citizens.

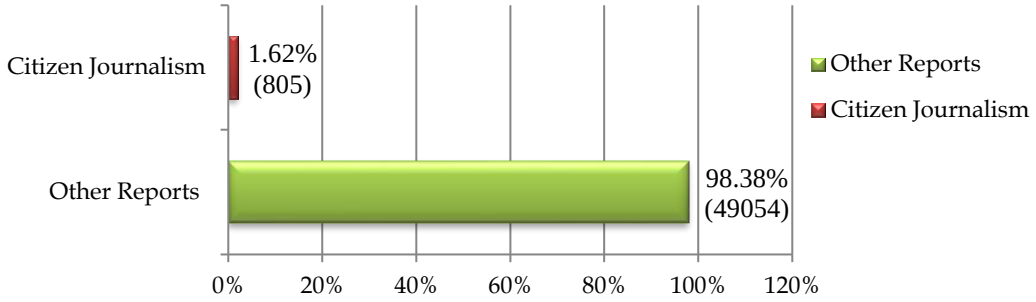


Figure 3. Frequency of Citizen Journalism

In this context, there are 3% stories published at *Prothom Alo*, 2% at *Kaler Kantha,* and 1% at *Samakal*. On the other hand, *Bangladesh Proditin* is the lowest in publishing news stories of citizen journalism (0.50%) (Figure-4). There are no dedicated pages or spaces for citizen journalism at *Samakal* and *Bangladesh Protidin*. Though *Kaler Kantha* publishes a page named 'Muktomona' (Free Expression), it is not regular. *Prothom Alo* contains a section named 'Chitipotro' (Letters) to place citizen journalism on regular basis.

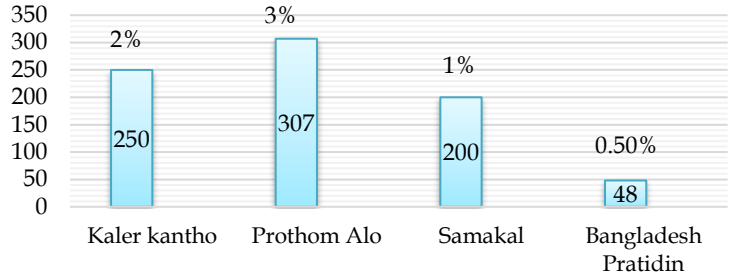


Figure 4. Newspaper Based Citizen Journalism

5.3.3. Using Infographic

The interviewees described the use of infographics as a strategy for the survival of newspapers. However, the figure-5 shows a very low percentage of using infographics in sampled newspapers (1.72%).

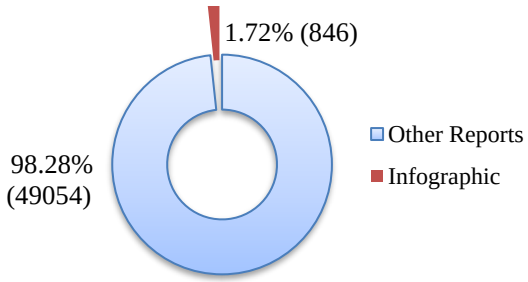


Figure 5. Frequency of Using Infographic

In this overall lowest frequency, *Prothom Alo* used infographics with 3% news stories. Then, *Samakal* and *Kaler Kantho* used it with 2% whereas *Bangladesh Protidin* used with 0.18% news stories. See figure-6.

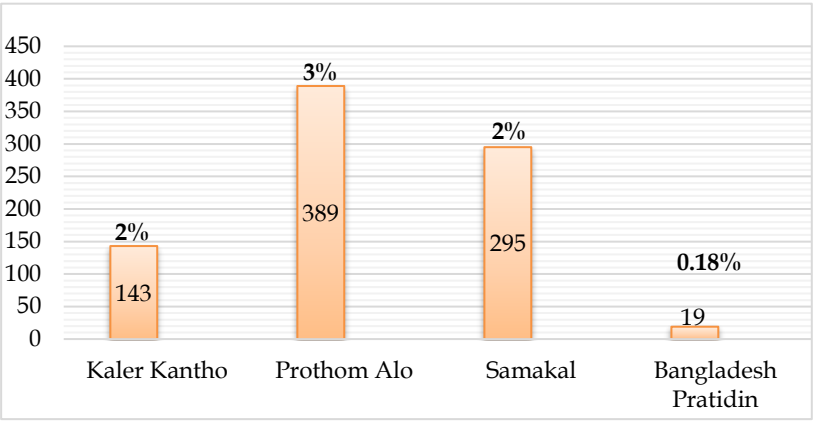


Figure 6. Newspaper Based Infographic

5.3.4. Using QR Code

It was found in the sampled newspapers that only *Prothom Alo* used QR Code with its 0.13% news. Except for it, no news stories were found with QR Code in other sampled newspapers. The result shows that the newspapers except *Prothom Alo* were utmost indifferent to use the QR Code in news stories.

6. Discussion

The results of the in-depth interviews and the content analysis showed that several strategies were devised for the survival of the newspapers of Bangladesh in the digital age, but yet to be properly applied in full swing. To meet the challenges of technological advancements, the interviewee mentioned creating online versions, giving emphasis on special reports, running the platforms under the integrated newsrooms, using QR code, integrating citizen journalism, accessing social media, and using an infographic as strategies of their newspapers. The overall result of the study showed an imbalanced and unconstructed process on which the newspapers are running. Because the results reflected the indifference of all newspapers to utilize other strategies. The percentage of use of these strategies is very low. Except for the frequency of the special story, each strategy's frequency is below 5%. The results suggest that there is no coordination between strategies and their applications in the newspapers. As there is no emphasis on the application of strategies, there is no dedicated procedure to measure the effectiveness of the strategies. Since the strategies are still in the planning stage, the newspapers are still following the traditional methods until now. The study also reflected the unequal economic base of the sampled newspapers that are facilitating only *Prothom Alo* to control the media-market. Based on this advantage, this newspaper is trying to apply some of the strategies initially. *Prothom Alo* runs news portals with a dedicated organogram and conducts social media with focus and the highest subscriptions. The results also showed that only *Prothom Alo* started running print and online versions under an integrated newsroom very primarily whereas this strategy is still in the planning stage in other newspapers. Without *Prothom Alo*, no newspapers used QR code with stories. However, the other newspapers are suffering from a weak economic base, scarcity of human resources and times, social limitations that do not allow them to plan strategies with execution properly. This environment is creating a monopoly of a particular newspaper that is

detrimental to the newspaper industry as a whole. So, the necessity of the executions of strategies is not being felt yet in the newspapers industries that are leading to the decline of circulations and weakening the economic base day by day. As a result, the newspapers of Bangladesh are highly potential to make their survival at stake.

7. Conclusion

As a newspaper is an effective tool to disseminate objective and credible news stories even in digital time, all of the concerns should emphasize how to make newspapers survive with proper strategies in the digital age. The newspapers of Bangladesh should not only rely upon planning strategies but also focus on their immediate applications with checking their effectiveness on regular basis. The newspaper industries must monitor the ever-changing atmosphere of media and audience in the digital age, and, based on findings, devise strategies to cope up with the changes. Besides, for the sake of the state and nation, the government should come forward with sustainable supports and efforts. The government should eradicate all of the obstacles and challenges the study found to ease the way for newspapers to be printed and spread around the country. A coordinated endeavor can prepare the newspaper to reach the readers by meeting all of the challenges. The problems that the newspapers are facing should also be addressed with high emphasis. The patterns of ownership should also be observed whether the ownership structure is creating any obstacles behind the lack of coordination between planning and executions. As the newspapers could not build themselves as institutions yet in Bangladesh, those are working as spokesperson of media owners and influential. Ferdous (2006) argued that the mass media of Bangladesh ignored the interests of mass people for being controlled by business and influentials persons. The study suggested that the newspapers of Bangladesh are not paying heed to the readers' interests in the digital age. So, further research can be conducted on the impact of ownerships to seek relations between ownership and survival of newspaper in the digital age.

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