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LEAD ARTICLE
The rise of digital authoritarianism: Evolving threats to media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan

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Abstract
Digital authoritarianism poses increasing challenges within both autocratic and democratic regimes. The evolving mechanisms of digital authoritarianism surpass national boundaries. Over the past decade they have advanced the interests of authoritarian states to undermine the freedoms of media and the Internet. In competitive authoritarian regimes, like Pakistan, digital authoritarianism has paved its way under democratic disguise. Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index 2020 indicates that the country ranks at 145 out of total 178 countries. Moreover, Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net 2020 survey reveals Pakistan among the worst ten countries in terms of Internet and digital media freedoms. Considering these facts, hence this study examines digital authoritarianism in the journalistic context. It explores evolving threats to media and internet freedoms due to the increasing authoritarian practices of Pakistan’s state authorities in digital realm. This is significant so as to unpack how the country’s authorities restrain media and Internet freedoms in the digital age. To achieve this aim, this study uses the qualitative method of online interviews and presents findings thematically.

Keywords
Digital authoritarianism, media freedom, Internet freedom, competitive authoritarian regime.

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Introduction
The proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the fast-paced digitalization has opened up a world of opportunities for the public's empowerment and information exchange. Particularly, developments in digital media, are important because they are becoming a bedrock of contemporary information societies and journalism. The advantages of digital media, especially the use of the Internet, is often heralded in terms of better news productivity, swift dissemination, an increased public’s engagement, political and social mobilization (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018; Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2019). The Internet is indispensable to contemporary journalism, particularly investigative and cross-border journalism networks, which depend on information exchange across and to deliver important information to the public in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding positive implications, the proliferation of the Internet and fast-paced digitalization have also created many threats to the freedoms of media and the Internet. Journalists and news media organizations are now faced with digital authoritarianism, which is redefining threats to media freedom in many parts of the world. Repressive actions, such as the governments’ online censorship, use of digital tools to monitor journalists and their sources, is widespread in democratic and authoritarian regimes both.

Digital authoritarianism is emerging as an overlying challenge within autocracies and democracies (Jamil & Muschert, 2020). However, authoritarian states demonstrate an increased interest in using digital tools and techniques to restrain fundamental human rights and to undermine the freedom of media. Hitherto, ‘cohort of countries is moving toward digital authoritarianism by embracing extensive censorship and automated surveillance systems’ (Shabaz, 2018). Authoritarian governments, thus around the world, are using technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to control journalists’ work and restrain media and Internet freedoms. ‘The term digital authoritarianism has unfortunately now entered our lexicon’ (Matthews & Tsagarouilis, 2020).

In the case of Pakistan, the country can be described as a competitive authoritarian state, where democratic norms are quite often abused and media freedom is attacked through various mechanisms. Therefore, the state-media relationship in Pakistan, has never been friendly and the state has remained authoritative to control news media and journalists using different tactics (Akhtar & Pratt, 2017; Jamil, 2015; Mezzera & Sial, 2010; Parveen & Nawaz, 2018). With the advent of Internet and the growth of ICTs in Pakistan, now
the Pakistani journalists use digital platforms to report on issues. Evidently, now journalists’ reporting can reach-out quicker and to a broader audience than before in Pakistan. Unfortunately, they are confronted with new forms of the government’s authoritarian practices, such as the Internet and television channels’ transmissions blockages, online threats and content censorship, imposition of stringent laws including the Prevention for Electronic Crimes Act (2016) and the Investigation for Fair Trial Act (2013), and digital surveillance of media professionals (Jamil, 2021a). These authoritarian practices have drastically affected the state of media freedom in Pakistan, and the country ranks at 145 out of total 178 countries in the Reporters without borders’ World Press Freedom Index 2020 (Reporters without borders, 2020). ‘Globally, Pakistan is among the worst ten countries in terms of Internet and digital media freedom’ (Freedom House, 2020; Jahangir, 2019).

Reports by international organizations, evaluating media freedom and journalists’ protection, do regularly highlight the declining state of media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan (Freedom House, 2020; Reporters without borders, 2020). Likewise, there are a number of recent and past studies that have addressed journalism practice and media freedom in Pakistan (Akhtar & Pratt, 2017; Dickinson & Memon, 2012; Mezzera & Sial, 2010; Pintak & Nazir, 2013); the state-media relationship in the country (Hussain, 2020); the state of press freedom (Jamil, 2015; Siraj, 2009); journalists’ freedom and safety (Aslam, 2015; Jamil, 2020a); freedom of expression, press freedom and self-censorship (Nadadur, 2007; Park-Ozee, 2019; Parveen & Nawaz, 2018); journalists’ digital surveillance (Jamil, 2021a). More recently, Wagner (2017) offers an overview of the Internet shutdowns in Pakistan. This is an important study given it focuses on the state's authoritarian practices to attack the Internet freedom. While these prior studies are significant, yet no research has been carried out in the journalistic context to unpack the ways state exercises digital authoritarianism in Pakistan, and how it poses threats to media and Internet freedoms in the country. Therefore, drawing on the framework of competitive authoritarianism, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature. The article starts with the review of literature into the concepts of authoritarianism and digital authoritarianism, and the state of media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan. Next, the article explains competitive authoritarianism as the framework of this study. The article then goes on articulating the methodology and findings of the study. Lastly, it offers some recommendations to combat the rising digital authoritarianism in Pakistan.
Literature review
Understanding authoritarianism and digital authoritarianism

Scholarship suggest that authoritarianism has different conceptual aspects. Political scientists describe it as a regime that does not hold regular, free and impartial elections. ‘The presence or absence of free and fair elections is considered as the primary touchstone of whether a state is authoritarian or democratic’ (Glasius, 2018). On the contrary political psychologists, do not focus on the regime type, rather they consider the personalities of power holders that are ‘characterized by a desire for order and hierarchy and a fear of outsiders’ (Glasius, 2018). In many democratic regimes, authoritarianism is a practice of ruling authorities that manifests itself in form of their authoritarian values and acts to influence the electoral process and to restrain the fundamental human rights and the freedom of media (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This implies that democracy is not all about the presence of fair elections, it demands respect and protection for rights to freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of association. Therefore, authoritarianism is not just a regime type that is characterized by the state’s failure to hold free elections, rather it is a practice as well that manifests itself in ruling authorities’ failure to respect fundamental freedoms and rights (Hadenius & Teorell, 2007).

Technological advancements have empowered the masses to raise their voices for their fundamental rights and have facilitated the success of activists’ movements in many parts of the world. Opposition groups, in uprisings such as the Arab Spring, have notably used social media to organize their activities for strengthening democracy. Past studies have also suggested that an increase in the Internet adoption’s rates is linked with both transitions to democracy and better levels of democracy, and hence improvements in respect for human rights. Technology can have a negative impact on human rights, such as rights to freedom of expression and access to information. For instance, technological advancements empower authoritarian governments by enabling ‘preventive repression’, which is often the rst and most important line of defense for authoritarians, hence allowing them to practice digital authoritarianism through using technological tools for preventive repression and exploitation of human rights (Ritter & Conrad, 2016). Dragu & Przeworski (2019) suggest: ‘Preventive repression as the set of activities governments use to reduce the risk that opposition groups threaten governments’ power, including opposition e orts to mobilize and organize public dissent. Preventive repression can include a wide range of tactics aimed at identifying, monitoring, and tracking potential regime opponents so as to neutralize them before they pose any real threat to the government’ (Dragu & Przeworski, 2019, cited in Dragu & Lupu, 2020).
In recent times, for instance, authoritarian governments have adopted new techniques to practice digital authoritarianism, which is ‘the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations’ (Polyakova & Meserole). Digital authoritarianism mostly includes techniques, such as: Internet censorship\(^2\); online harassment; cyber-attacks; Internet shutdowns\(^3\); targeted persecution against online users; the use of voice recognition to scan mobile networks, GPS for tracking publics’ movement using GPS, digital surveillance of public’s electronic communication on e-mail, wats app and social media sites (Reuters & Szakonyi, 2015). These techniques do not only affect people’s Internet freedom, but it does affect journalists’ work and the freedom of media more broadly.

**News media ecology and the state of media freedom in Pakistan**

Pakistan’s linguistically diverse news media is very vibrant in South Asia. There is a cross-media ownership and there is a dominance of six media groups in

\(^2\) Wagner (2018) highlight the generations of internet censorship. ‘The first generation focused on “filtering systems at the backbone of the country’s Internet \(<\ldots>\) represents the first generation of Internet control techniques’ (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010a). The ‘second-generation controls aim to create a legal and normative environment and technical capabilities that enable state actors to deny access to information resources as and when needed’ (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010b). The ‘key characteristic of third-generation controls is that the focus is less on denying access than successfully competing with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents’ (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010b). The ‘fourth phase \(<\ldots>\) we call “access contested”. Although the central characteristics of the previous phases remain relevant, the key notion of this phase \(<\ldots>\) is that the contest over access has burst into the open’ (Deibert et al., 2011).

\(^3\) Wagner (2018) suggests that the internet shutdowns ‘differ from Internet censorship in several different ways: 1) Internet shutdowns do not discriminate regarding content. Instead, they block all content and do not attempt to discriminate what kind of content they block, whereas Internet censorship targets specific items or types of content; 2) Internet shutdowns encompass all forms of digital communication. Although Internet censorship only affects Internet communications, Internet shutdowns typically also directly affect mobile phone and sometimes even other forms of telephony. This makes the scope of communications affected significantly broader; 3) Internet shutdowns have different effects than Internet censorship, as they have an entirely different scope and the focus of the measure is different. Although in the context of Internet censorship some digital communication is still possible, and some access to uncensored content exists, this is not the case during Internet shutdowns. As a result, communicative ruptures can only meaningfully be discussed in the context of Internet shutdowns and not in the context of Internet censorship; 4) Internet shutdowns have a different intent than does Internet censorship, as their focus is not on a specific piece of content but rather on the act of communication itself’.


the country: The *Dawn Group*, the *Jang Group*, the *Express Group*, the *ARY Group*, *Dunya Group*, and the *HUM TV Group* (Jamil, 2021b). According to the statistics of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), ‘the number of newspapers and periodicals in the country stood at 539 in 2016. As of late 2017, 89 satellite TV licenses have been issued by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority’ (Najam, 2019, cited in Jamil, 2020b). Most of the news channels broadcasts news in Urdu language. However, there are many channels that broadcasts news in ethnic/or provincial languages, such as Pashtu, Sindhi, Balochi and Punjabi (Jamil, 2020c).

As far as the state-media relationship is concerned, it has been not so amiable in Pakistan and the state remains powerful to repress media and journalists through: press laws (such as criminal libel laws (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860), Official Secrecy Act (1923), Blasphemy laws (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860); takeover of media outlets (such as Progressive Press Limited); the establishment of government’s mouth-piece news outlets (such as the National Press Trust); controlling of news agencies (such as the Associated Press of Pakistan); restrictive allocation of advertising quota to newspapers; banning of transmission and cancellation of licenses of television news channels; and distribution of awards to journalists that report in favor of the government (Jamil, 2015; Mezzera & Sial, 2010; Siraj, 2009).

Unfortunately, the fear and the power of government and intelligence agencies override media freedom and its watchdog role in Pakistan (Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2019; Sarfraz, 2020). The promulgation of laws, such as PECA law (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016) and the Investigation for Fair Trial Act (2013), has further increased the journalists’ concerns about their digital surveillance. Pakistan’s PECA law (2016) now empowers Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to surveil and block anything that is deemed as offensive to any person, religion and against the national interest of the country. Investigation to Fair Trial Act (2013) empowers the state authorities to monitor journalists and citizens of Pakistan on the pretext of fair trial (Jamil, 2020a). These laws retrain the freedom of media given not only they affect journalists’ work, but also they are vague in explanations of what exactly considered as objectionable and against the national interest of Pakistan.

**The state of Internet freedom in Pakistan**

The Internet penetration has considerably increased in Pakistan during the past decade (Jamil, 2020d). The country’s government has been able to successfully provide the Internet’s access to remote areas in recent years, despite the Pakistani
citizens and residents still confront the challenge of digital divide. ‘Pakistan is the fourth-largest country in Asia – behind Indonesia, India and China’ (Hussain, 2017). Yet, a large proportion of the Pakistani people still cannot access and use the Internet and as the penetration remains worryingly low. The Internet access in Pakistan stands at ‘around 35 percent, with 78 million broadband and 76 million mobile Internet (3/4G) connections’ (The Economist, 2020; Jamil, 2019).

One of the major challenges is the Internet freedom in Pakistan, in addition to the country’s existing digital divide. ‘Internet freedom includes concepts such as digital rights, freedom of access to information, and net neutrality’ (Alais, 2020). Digital rights are basically same fundamental human rights that exist in the offline world, as well as in the online world. This means acknowledging fundamental human rights (such as rights to freedom of expression, access to information, reputation and privacy) in the cyberspace (Nitsche & Hairsine, 2016). Therefore, the provision of digital rights is linked to the freedom of media. Journalists need rights to freedom of expression to express themselves freely online and to access the information using the Internet. Media organizations need freedom to run their news web-sites freely and to broadcast and publish news content online without any restrictions. Nevertheless, this is not the case of Pakistan. For instance, Pakistan’s authorities often interrupt telecommunication services during protests, elections, and religious and national holidays, providing the reason of security concerns to the public (Jamil, 2020d). Now the country’s authorities use PECA laws (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016) and the Investigation for Fair Trial Act (2013) to silence critical journalists for their online expression and commentaries.

Recently, the Pakistani government has passed a new set of laws that is aimed to control extremism, terrorism, online hate speech, incitement of violence and anti-state sentiments and the dissemination of fake news on social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter). Media professionals are now more concerned considering these laws would further strengthen digital censorship in Pakistan (Dawn, 2020). The ‘Citizens protection (against online harm) rules, 2020’ require Google, Facebook and Twitter to filter or remove social media posts that are considered objectionable by the government of Pakistan. The new set of laws empower the government to obtain data and information from the aforementioned companies (Shahzad, 2020). In addition to the introduction of new laws, Pakistan’s Ministry of Information and Telecommunications requires social media companies to deploy their contact persons in the country, who would be obliged to report a National Coordinator, appointed by the country’s Ministry of Information and Telecommunications (Chabba, 2020).
Apart from stringent laws, the government’s and intelligence agencies’ surveillance and social media monitoring are key concerns of the Pakistani journalists (Bari, 2021). Ironically, to date, there are no adequate laws for online data protection and online free speech right in Pakistan. Therefore, journalists exercise self-censorship, when writing (either online or offline) on topics such as: religion, blasphemy, civil-military relations, separatist movements, and women’s and other minority communities’ rights (Azeem, 2019; Chaudry, 2018; Park-Ozee, 2019). Thus, it is evident that digital authoritarianism is on rise in its various forms in Pakistan. However, this study unpacks in detail how it poses threats to media and Internet freedoms in the country.

Theoretical framework: Competitive authoritarianism

Competitive authoritarianism can be defined as a ‘hybrid political system’ and ‘one of the sub-types of non-democracies’, which is ‘characterized by the weak enforcement of formal rules’ (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Unlike authoritarian regimes, such hybrid political system is marked by regular elections, though these are not free and impartial. To control competition, official authorities continually breakup rules of democratic institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2002), and they impose restraints on both ‘political organization and political candidates’ (Ottaway, 2003). Distinctly, in competitive authoritarian regimes, independent media exists but the freedom of media is quite often attacked. Therefore, it lacks institutions that hold power holders accountable and effective regulatory frameworks that protect journalists (Chaocon, 2009).

In view of the scholarly description of competitive authoritarianism, Pakistan can be considered as a competitive authoritarian regime where elections are basically a democratic disguise, the ruling or dominant political party earns almost all the seats, democratic norms are frequently abused, and journalists and media professionals are often attacked being critical of the government and the state institutions (Park-Ozee, 2019). Journalists face surveillance, which is at times life threatening to them. The ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms to protect their rights to freedom, privacy and safety creates an imbalance of power-relationship between the state and journalists. The advent of technology has provided new ways to the Pakistani authorities to attack the freedom of media through digital surveillance of journalists, blockage of news web-sites, Internet shut down, restrictions on free speech on social media platforms and imposition of laws that pave the way for digital mass surveillance (Digital Rights Foundation, 2018). Thus, the rationale for using the framework of competitive authoritarianism is to investigate the ways digital authoritarianism is posing
threats to media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan, which is governed by a
democratic government, yet reflects a myriad of authoritarian practices of
ruling authorities.

**Methodology**

**Research question, data collection method and sampling**

This study uses the qualitative method of online interview to explore a research
question, namely: how digital authoritarianism poses threats to media and
Internet freedoms in Pakistan? A total of 20 Pakistani male and female
journalists (i.e., 10 males and 10 females) have been interviewed online using
Zoom. Given the possible risks of interviewing journalists face-to-face and
travel restrictions due to COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher has chosen to
carry-out online interviews. Furthermore, interviewed journalists have been
selected using purposive sampling (see Lavrakas, 2008). The rationale for
using purposive sampling is to make sure the journalists’ representation from
Pakistan’s mainstream Urdu and English languages’ newspapers and television
news channels both.

The male and female journalists, who have participated in this study, are
of age ranging between 28 and 55 years, and they are full-time employee of
Pakistan’s mainstream Urdu and English languages’ newspapers and television
news channels. Journalists, who have been interviewed in this study, are full time
employees of four leading English language’s newspapers (*Daily Dawn, Express
Tribune, The Nation, and The News International*); three leading Urdu language’s
newspapers (*Daily Jang, Daily Express, and Nawa-e-Waqt*); seven Urdu language’s
News, Dunya News, and Pakistan Television Corporation – PTV News*). Furthermore,
all selected journalists in this study, are those who manage journalistic work for
the news web-sites of their respective news organizations, apart from their work
for traditional media (i.e., newspapers and television news channels). This means
the selection of journalists with experience of online and offline journalism both.
Internet is the need of every journalist these days to carry-out his/ or her routine
work. However, the purpose of selecting the Pakistani journalists with experience
of online journalism is to shed light on the state’s digital authoritarian practices,
based on their routine observation and experiences of online journalism.

**Data collection process**

The researcher has gathered the data of this study between 18th September,
2020 and 3rd November, 2020 through online interviews. Initially, the
researcher had communicated to working journalists in Karachi through phone calls and e-mails using her personal contacts. There were some difficulties during the data collection. Many contacted journalists could not give online interview due to their Internet connectivity issues as per the scheduled time, as well as because of their personal and professional problems. However, the researcher was able to complete 20 online interviews by the first week of November, 2020. In this study, each journalist has been interviewed for around 50-60 minutes online and in English language, which is the official language of Pakistan. Subsequently, the interviews’ transcripts have been transcribed and analyzed for themes. Journalists, in this study, have been interviewed online using Zoom.

All interviewed journalists have been asked questions using an interview guide, which lists key interview questions, for instance: what traditional ways of attacking media freedom have been used in Pakistan since its inception as an independent country? How have attacks on media freedom changed with the advent of technology? What tactics do state authorities use to control journalists’ online work? How is Internet freedom curtailed by Pakistan’s government? How do journalists view the impact of state’s digital authoritarianism on media and Internet freedoms in the country? These are the key interview questions that have been asked to Pakistani journalists. However, based on journalists’ responses, they have been asked follow-up interview questions.

**Challenges of online interviews**

Online interviews, as a data collection method, have advantages and disadvantages both. For example, the main plus point is that it helps the collection of data distantly, especially when it is difficult to conduct interviews in person during the pandemics. However, it has some limitations too. For instance, in countries like Pakistan, not every person has access to reliable Internet connection at home and there are other problems, such as frequent electricity load shedding and power failure. Therefore, for a number of journalists, the researcher had to repeatedly reschedule the online interview and four interviews have been conducted in two separate sessions due to Internet interruption at the interviewees’ workplace. Despite technical issues, online interviews require extra effort and time to discuss the research topic and scope with interviewees. For this purpose, the researcher scheduled short Zoom meetings with 11 journalists, and discussed research project with rest of them on phone calls, which was expensive though. These issues can be exhausting for the researchers, who carry out data collection remotely.
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Challenge of bias in qualitative research
Bias usually refers to the influence of a researcher’s individual opinions and thoughts that may distort the results of a study (Polit & Beck, 2014). In qualitative research, the issue of bias is very common, and researchers often find it hard to justify the fairness and trustworthiness of their collected data (Thorne et al., 2016). A host of strategies can be used to avoid the occurrence of a researcher’s bias in qualitative studies. In this study, the researcher used mainly two strategies: (i) the use of additional data sources to better understand the state of media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan, (ii) the maintenance of coding consistency and the use of secondary coder for fair interpretation of data.

To avoid individual bias, the researcher firstly reviewed past five years’ reports by international and national organizations that regularly monitor violations against media and Internet freedoms such as reports by Freedom House, Reporters without borders, Committee to protect journalists (CPJ) and Digital rights foundations (Pakistan). In addition to reviewing reports by these organizations, the researcher also reviewed scholarly studies into media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan. However, the review of scholarly studies suggested the scarcity of national studies into this area.

Moreover, the researcher remotely worked together with a secondary coder, who is a PhD student in a local university in Karachi. The purpose of having a secondary coder was to ensure data coding consistency and the fair interpretation of coded data. The first round of data coding indicated subtle differences in coded themes primarily in terms of the phrasing of codes by the researcher and secondary coder. Subsequently, both coders discussed the coding of data in order to finalize the codes and themes for thematic analysis.

Data ethics and analysis
All interviewed journalists have been provided a project information sheet through e-mail that explains information about a research topic, types of interview questions, voluntary involvement in research project, anonymity of journalists’ names and their access to research findings once it is published. The project information sheet also explains the key terms in interview questions, such as digital authoritarianism, Internet freedom and digital rights. This was done to obtain journalists’ responses with better clarity.

With the purpose of ensuring the privacy and safety of interviewees, all interviewed journalists have been quoted using numbers (ranging between 1 and 20). In addition, this study employs thematic analysis to analyze the interview data under sub-themes that have emerged inductively from the data, revealing threats to freedoms of media and the Internet in Pakistan. The sub-themes have
been categorized according with the frequency or prevalence of keywords in the journalists’ responses to the research question. The prevalence of sub-themes (i.e., indicated with p), corroborated with quantitative estimations, has been decided based on the number of journalists’ responses in each sub-theme.

Results and discussion

Threats to media freedom due to digital authoritarianism in Pakistan

Authoritarian governments, across the world, devote more time and resources on controlling and repressing dissent than on the well-being of their citizens. Pakistan is no different (Jelani, 2019). Authoritarian practices, such as election manipulation, media propaganda against opposition groups, censorship, financial incentives to journalists, legal actions against critical journalists and media organizations, all have been in common in Pakistan since decades (Akhtar & Pratt, 2017). However, the situation of media freedom has turned apprehensive in the past couple of years that is manifested in Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists’ call for nationwide campaign to combat censorship and protect the freedom of media. Saeed (2021), in his report for Arab News, writes: ‘Journalists’ complaints range from direct edicts to editors and producers not to air or publish news critical of the government or the military, the suppression of opposition political voices, pulling TV stations from transmission or newspapers from circulation and targeting the advertising revenue of dissenting media. Newspapers and news channels across the country have announced mass layoffs in recent months as advertising funding and revenues have dried up’.

Echoing the concerns of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), The News International reports: ‘The council ‘heavily criticized’ the government for allowing and even forcing media regulators including Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), Pakistan Press Council (PCP), and Pakistan Telecom Authority (PTA) to exceed their mandates and use coercive means to hound journalists and pressurize media houses to crush freedom of expression and professional journalism’. (The News, 2021)

While these reports indicate an increased control of state’s institutions on journalists’ work and the operation of free media, this study reveals a rampant rise in digital authoritarianism in Pakistan. All interviewed journalists suggest that the freedom of media has declined because of the abuse of their digital rights by the Pakistani authorities. For instance, male producer of a private television news channels, states:

We do have constitutional rights to freedom of expression and access to information. Articles 19 and 19 (A) of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973)
guarantee rights to freedom of expression and access to information, but with certain restrictions. However, these rights are not practiced in reality. Now with the emergence of cyberspace, journalists are more concerned about their digital rights, such as online free speech, access to information, online data and privacy protection. (Interviewee number 3)

When talking about the state-media relationship and the declining media freedom in Pakistan, a senior journalist of a private television news channel in Karachi, highlights:

The state-media relationships have always been turbulent in Pakistan since its inception as an independent country. However, now digital surveillance and online censorship have emerged as an advanced forms of the government’s media control in Pakistan. I have stopped writing articles for the news web-site of an Urdu-language’s newspaper. I was told by the editor that he had received pressure calls from the government’s officials to edit the critique on government in my articles. (Interviewee number 2)

The political legacy of Pakistan can be viewed as one of the key defining aspects of the state-media relationship in Pakistan. For instance, an interviewee from an English-language’s newspaper underlines, ‘we have a few dominant political parties that rule the country alternatively. Then the military has a huge influence on the Pakistani politics. This creates barriers to facilitate the free operation of media as per the constitutional rights’ (Interviewee number 16).

Interviewees’ responses reveal three major threats to media freedom due to the state’s authoritarian practices in the digital realm. Table 1, below, explains major threats to media and Internet freedoms due to digital authoritarianism in Pakistan.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Number of male interviewees (n=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 1: Digital surveillance of journalists (p=20)</td>
<td>20 out of 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 2: Digital risks (cyberattacks, threats to privacy) (p=13)</td>
<td>13 out of 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 3: State’s propagation of disinformation (p=4)</td>
<td>4 out of 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Digital technologies permit new forms of digital surveillance and data collection that threaten journalists’ right to privacy, as well as pose risks to their safety. The majority of interviewed journalists highlight that surveillance of journalists’ digital communications (such as through mobile phones, e-mails, wats app and social media sites), is carried out by the intelligence and law enforcement agencies in Pakistan (See Table 1, Sub-theme 1). Consequently, journalists are unable to perform their routine work safely and freely and that has implications for the freedom of media in Pakistan. In this regard, director news of a private television news channel, suggests:

We cannot expect a free media in Pakistan with the culture of surveillance. Now government and intelligence agencies do not have to surveil a journalist physically. Technology has made their task of journalists’ monitoring very easy. Journalists’ phone calls, e-mails, wats app communication and social media posts, all are monitored by the state authorities. Particularly journalists, who report on national security, politics and crime, are most affected by digital surveillance. And by the way, female journalists are not exempted if they are vocal or critical about the government, any political party and intelligence agencies. (Interviewee number 9)

Notably, journalists’ surveillance is not mere a common practice in authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes – such as Pakistan. This is now pervasive in the Western democracies too, turning them into ‘surveillance societies’ (Mills, 2019). For instance, in the United States, this is happening after Edward Snowden’s revelation about a surveillance programme, PRISM, developed by the National Security Agency (NSA). This surveillance programme permits NSA to keep a record of journalists’ communications through emails, telephone and social media; their personal and professional documents stored in digital devices (such as mobile phone and laptop); and other data repossessed from global Internet companies, including Google, Apple, Microsoft and Facebook (Bigo 2014; Lashmar, 2018; Lyon, 2015; Stein 2013). Digital surveillance of journalists is also common in other Western countries as well, such as Australia and the United Kingdom (Lowenthal 2015; Mills, 2019). In this way, digital authoritarianism is making its roots in the Western democracies as well. Nevertheless, the difficulty for the Pakistani journalists is related to the fatal safety risks that they experience due to constant and covert digital surveillance, which does affect their work and media freedom more broadly. For example, a female political reporter says:
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Digital surveillance is no more unique to authoritarian regimes given it is being practiced by the Western democratic governments too. But we must understand the nature of democracy in Pakistan. We do have a democratic government, which uses every mechanism to curb the freedom of media and to pose risk to journalists’ lives. Technology has basically made it easy for the government to use different digital tools to buttress their authoritarian practices. (Interviewee number 19)

Another female news producer of a private television news channel mentions:

Media is controlled through laws, restricted subsidies to newspapers and allocation of government’s advertisements, pressure and warning calls. But these controlling tactics do not result in life threat to journalists and their sources. Digital surveillance is risky given it is extremely easy to locate a journalist and his/or her sources. Personally, I do editing tasks for online news web-site of our television news channel, in addition to field reporting. I avoid writing any opinion piece because I do not want to come under the limelight being critical of some government’s recent actions against the news media (Interviewee number 17)

It is important to note that journalists frequently rely on whistleblowers and other confidential sources to collect and report information in the public interest, yet digital surveillance of journalists is risky for their sources’ physical safety and privacy both across Pakistan (See also Lashmar, 2018). With regard to this, a male political correspondent of a private television news channel, mentions:

Location tracking is so common now due to advancements in technology. The Pakistani journalists need to be really careful in their digital communications given they are operating in a surveillance state. It is not only risky for them, but also for their sources too. Then they do face cyberattacks in forms of email and social media accounts’ hacking and online threats. (Interviewee number 4)

Unpacking risks to journalists’ sources due to digital surveillance, Interviewee number 4 further says:

Let me share a recent incident, which has occurred with my male and female colleagues, and who work for two leading English-language newspapers. One of my male colleagues, who is based in Peshawar, has faced a car accident recently
in late August 2020. He left his home for a market and he was hit by a Van. My colleague reports actively on Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and he has been receiving constant death threats since last one year. He shares that his sources in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are missing and he is unable to contact with them. (Interviewee number 4)

The fast-evolving digital news media landscape offers great opportunities for the Pakistani journalists to investigate and report on information in the public interest, but it also poses specific challenges regarding the privacy and safety of journalistic sources due to an increased digital surveillance and online safety risks. This study suggests that an environment of fear has created for the Pakistani journalists and risks to their mental well-being have heightened due to the fear of digital surveillance and risks. ‘Now the state authorities are empowered to inject their fear among journalists through their digital surveillance. The sense of being monitored actually kills journalists mentally’, states a female interviewee (Interviewee number 20). This implies that creating fear among journalists is one of the state authorities’ motives of carrying out digital surveillance, in addition to keeping an eye on their activities in Pakistan. The matter of concern is journalists are not able to fully tackle with these challenges. For instance, according to an interviewee:

Four journalists have been murdered in 2020 in Pakistan. Three of them, including Aziz Menon, Javedullah Khan and Anwar Jan have lost their lives being critical reporters. Mostly journalists practice self-censorship either in their reports or on social media communication to avoid fatal consequences. They do not know what else they can do to mitigate risks associated with digital surveillance. (Interviewee number 6).

These findings suggest the necessity of journalists’ training to deal with digital risks in Pakistan. The practice of self-censorship is certainly not a solution to combat digital risks. ‘We are compelled to exercise caution in our social media communications, especially wat’s app and Facebook’, says a male interviewee (Interviewee number 2). Markedly, political and religious communications on social media demand a very high level of caution by the Pakistani journalists, thus limiting their use of new media platforms for sharing journalistic commentaries and reports. For example, a male interviewee highlights:

Our religious speech is restricted, either online or offline, because of blasphemy laws. And indeed no one would like to face violent public reaction. In
terms of political speech, particularly on social media (including Facebook and Twitter), some journalists are very vocal regardless of consequences. A majority practice self-censorship when posting critical posts about the government, political parties and the army. (Interviewee number 4)

This study further finds that digital authoritarianism has evolved in many other ways to affect the freedom of media and its integrity as an institution in Pakistan. For instance, some male journalists reveal that state authorities attempt to jeopardize the legitimacy of media as the watchdog of society through dissemination of fake news and disinformation on the Internet. ‘There are many news web-sites that are paid by the government and intelligence agencies to disseminate fake news and disinformation against opposition groups. Then social media has become a fertile ground for the dissemination of fake news and disinformation’, says a female news anchor of a private television news channel (Interviewee number 16). Similarly, another interviewed male journalist from an English-language newspaper, says that ‘the government and local political parties disseminate disinformation online for the sake of their vested interests. You cannot trust on information available on the social media’ (Interviewee number 6). Furthermore, interviewed journalists reveal the ascendance of informational flooding, which is a subtler method to impinge the legitimacy of free media in Pakistan. For instance, a female interviewee suggests:

Pakistan’s news media has recently confronted drastically with informational flooding – especially during the country’s 2018 election and COVID-19 pandemic. Now the state is not just relying on censorship, but it controls the information flow through Internet shutdown and online censorship, as well as by facilitating the flow of fake news and disinformation, which is a good way to distract the public’s attention and keep them engaged in absurd debates. The Pakistani journalists have to combat with such indirect attacks on the freedom of media and the government control over Internet freedom both. (Interviewee number 23)

‘Flooding assumes that censorship will not always succeed, and in fact might be counterproductive. It therefore does not bear the clear stamp of autocracy like traditional methods of control’ (Gunitsky, 2020). Flooding, in forms of false news and disinformation on social media, is thus becoming a common practice of the state’s authorities in Pakistan (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Consequently, social media have emerged as an untrusted source of news and information in Pakistan. For instance, a recent study conducted by Digital Rights
Foundation (2020), reveals that almost 88 percent of surveyed journalists find social media as the ‘least worthy source of information’. Interestingly, regardless of this fact, most journalists neither verify information available on social media nor they check the source of information (Digital rights foundation, 2020). These findings suggest that the state’s authoritarian practices are not entirely changing in Pakistan, rather the nature of controlling mechanisms are further expanding with new forms of digital repression, suggesting the transformations in state’s actions to curb media freedom within a competitive authoritarian regime. The next section further addresses the ways Pakistan’s authorities exercise authoritarian practices to curb the Internet freedom in the country.

**Threats to Internet freedom due to digital authoritarianism**

In the past decade, global Internet freedom has continuously declined as particularly the social media ever more being used by governments (either democratic, or authoritarian or competitive authoritarian) around the world as a ‘conduit for mass surveillance and electoral manipulation’. Digital platforms have now emerged as ‘a new battle ground for democracy’ (Belson, 2019), and the world witnesses a steady rise in digital authoritarianism. This study unpacks that Pakistan’s state authorities practice digital authoritarianism in three ways to control the Internet freedom in the country. *Table 2*, below, explains threats to Internet freedom due to digital authoritarianism in Pakistan.

**Table 2**

**Threats to Internet freedom due to digital authoritarianism in Pakistan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Number of male interviewees (n=20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 1: Social media laws and restriction on freedom of expression online (p=18)</td>
<td>18 out of 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 2: Internet shutdown (p=10)</td>
<td>10 out of 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-theme 3: Content blockage on the Internet (p=10)</td>
<td>10 out of 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of male and female journalists, in this study, express their concerns about Pakistan’s newly introduced Internet rules in 2020 and social media laws. For example, a female political reporter from a private television news channel, expresses her concern in a way:
The rise of digital authoritarianism: 
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Now you see the promulgation of Pakistan’s new Internet laws in the beginning of 2020. These are not just threat for Internet freedom, but indirectly it impinges on media freedom as well given it restricts journalists’ and media organizations’ freedom to post freely any critical posts on their social media sites. (Interviewee number 19)

Pakistan’s new Internet rules would not only pose chilling effect to the journalists’ right to freedom of expression, but also it would foster ambiguity of dos and don’ts among them. Though the new Internet rules do define the parameters of objectionable online content, it does not explicitly explain what is against the national interest of Pakistan? This would make journalistic job more difficult. The new Internet rules also directly affect the operation of social media companies in the country, including Google and Facebook. Earlier, the Internet shutdown used to occur for the public and in specific geographical areas, such as in Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces (Wagner, 2018). In urban cities, Internet shutdown happens usually during specific religious dates, such as 12th Rabi-ul-Awal (i.e., the birth of Holy Prophet peace be upon him) and 10th Moharram (i.e., the martyr day of Imam Hussain). The new Internet rules do not aim for shutdown, rather it has increased the state’s power to practice Internet censorship. For instance, a male interviewee from the state-owned television news channels, states:

Early in 2020, Pakistan’s government has introduced ‘Citizens protection (against online harm) rules’, which empowers Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to block or to remove any content that is considered as objectionable by state authorities. Though these rules define objectionable content (such as hate speech online, derogatory content towards Islam or any religion, speech against national security and national interest). But term, like national interest, is too broad. And it can be interpreted by different ruling governments differently. This allows a good pretext for carrying out online censorship. (Interviewee number 7)

Findings suggest that journalists, either working in state-owned media organization or in private news media organizations both, are apprehensive about the new Internet rules in Pakistan. They view that these rules would not only affect working journalists for their routine work, but these would affect common masses as well. Interestingly, a few female journalists and a male journalist from Urdu-language newspapers, view Pakistan’s Internet rules as
necessary for maintaining religious and cultural values of the country (See Table 2, Sub-theme 1). For example, a female journalist from a leading Urdu-language’s newspaper emphasizes:

I don’t see any problem in new Internet laws of Pakistan. You look at our society. People have simply forgotten their culture and values. Internet web-sites need to be regulated as per the Islamic laws and considering what is appropriate in our society. (Interviewee number 12)

Another female interviewee from an Urdu-language’s newspaper asserts:

People randomly posts content that deemed as indecent or at times can impinge the national interest of Pakistan. Particularly, political content that enhances ethnic divide in Pakistan and aggravate political relations among provinces. Religiously, Pakistan is a Muslim country and government is absolutely correct to monitor blasphemous content online. (Interviewee number 15)

Unregulated political speech, on the Internet and specifically social media, has potential to move the public into segmented ‘echo chambers’, increasing ethnic differences and political conflict in Pakistan. In many other Asian countries, Internet has proven to be a fertile ground for disinformation, hate speech and propaganda in the past couple of years. For example, a report by Freedom House released in 2018, suggests: ‘Over the past 12 months in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, false rumors and hateful propaganda that were spread online incited jarring outbreaks of violence against ethnic and religious minorities. Such rifts often serve the interests of antidemocratic forces in society, the government, or hostile foreign states, which have actively encouraged them through content manipulation’. (Shahbaz, 2018)

Issues, such as online hate speech and racism, political propaganda, incitement of violence and terrorism, offence to religion, require governments to develop regulatory frameworks for the Internet and social media. The author argues that regulating Internet freedom in competitive authoritarian countries, like Pakistan, is not transparent because state authorities do have several mechanisms to attack media and Internet freedoms under democratic disguise. Pakistan is a pre-dominantly a Muslim country, which already has laws that restrict blasphemous speech (e.g., Pakistan Penal Code, 1860; Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973); and defamatory speech (Criminal libels laws of Pakistan Penal Code, 1860; Defamation Ordinance, 2002). The new
set of regulations, including ‘Citizens protection (against online harm) rules, 2020’, empowers Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) for ‘removal and blocking’ of digital content that ‘harms, intimidates or excites disaffection’ towards the government or poses a threat to the ‘integrity, security and defence of Pakistan’ (Shahzad, 2020). Besides, Pakistan’s new Internet rules requires service providers and social media companies (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) to ensure effective filtration to avoid dissemination of content that is considered pornographic, offensive to Islam or any other religion, incite hatred and violence, foster terrorism and harmful for the country’s national security. In the case of non-compliance, social media companies and service providers may face fines up to 500 million rupees ($3.14 million). Unlike a few journalists, as quoted above, many interviewed journalists, thus express their concerns regarding social media laws and restrictions on online free speech in Pakistan. For example, a senior male journalist of an English-language newspaper, expresses his concerns:

The new Internet rules are apprehensive. They do not just affect public in general. These rules provide an unprecedented censorship powers to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. The Pakistani news media is already facing attacks on its freedom through various other ways, particularly through constant journalists’ surveillance, life threats, restrictive allocations of government’s advertisements and pressure calls. With such massive restrictions for free speech on social media and other Internet sites, we can only expect further damage to the freedom of media, especially digital media, such as online news web-sites and broadcasters. (Interviewee number 6)

Despite the issue of Internet and social media laws, Pakistan’s government at times restricts Internet access or limit the provision of Internet services in certain areas of the country that serves to curb the public’s right to freedom of expression and access to information (Jamil, 2020e, 2020f). One of the male interviewed journalists, in this study, reveals:

Internet shutdown in certain areas, such as Balochistan, North and South Waziristan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), is a routine practice in Pakistan. Then the government shuts Internet on religious events such as 12th Rabi-ul-Awal (i.e., the birth of Holy Prophet, peace be upon him) and during Moharram processions in the first Islamic month. Though the government and law enforcement agencies offer justification of Internet shutdown to the public,
saying it is to prevent any terrorist activity. However, it does not make sense to me. Now you imagine a journalist operating in a situation when mobile and Internet services are suspended. (Interviewee number 10)

Markedly, the Internet freedom has declined during 2020 due to the state authorities’ increased blocking of political, social, and cultural web-sites and undeclared policy of connectivity restrictions in Pakistan. According to a female news producer of the state-owned television news channel:

Cyberspace space for public and freedom of expression in Pakistan has minimized, while digital surveillance and stringency of laws have increased. Many news web-sites experience blockages frequently. Threats to media freedom have transformed in Pakistan. Now it has taken forms of online censorship and digital surveillance. Given there is only one state-owned broadcaster, journalists working in private news media organizations, feel the heat of digital authoritarianism more. (Interviewee number 13)

This study manifests that the Internet shutdown, web-sites’ blockage and online content removal have not just affected the Internet freedom in Pakistan, but it is affecting the freedom of media as well. ‘As now growing portions of journalistic activity take place on the Internet, Pakistan is certainly not a safer place for those expressing critical opinions on the Internet. They may face judicial trials, attacks and threats’, for instance says a female interviewed journalist from an Urdu-language newspaper (Interviewee number 14). Thus, the Internet is now a powerful tool for strengthening and legitimizing the power of competitive authoritarian rule in Pakistan.

Conclusion
Drawing on the framework of competitive authoritarianism, this study suggests that both old and new threats exist when journalists decide to be critical of the government and intelligence agencies in Pakistan. The old threats to media freedom, in forms of violence, stringent laws, physical surveillance, arbitrary detentions and life threats, are pervasive in the country. What has changed is the government’s and intelligence agencies’ use of digital tools to intervene journalists’ work and the freedom of media through digital surveillance, online threats and cyberattacks. This study suggests that the competitive authoritarian milieu of Pakistan is evolving given now state employs different tactics to curb the freedoms of media and the Internet, thereby to strengthen its power, control and fear over journalists. The most
notable tactic is to create the fear of surveillance and digital risks, and to facilitate information flooding, as suggested by the interviewed journalists in this study. While using the traditional methods of repression, Pakistan’s state authorities make it more difficult for journalists to access information through Internet shutdown and online censorship. In addition, digital autocrats use information flooding and fake social media accounts for digital propaganda that help the government to amplify narratives and to create polarization among journalists, as well as to control information received by the public. Administering the national infrastructure and legislation of telecommunication, now Pakistan’s government successfully block journalists’ and the public’s access to specific Internet content, and monitor and persecute dissident online authors (Jamil, 2020e).

As aforementioned, now an increasing portion of journalistic work involves the use of Internet. This necessitates Pakistan’s government to acknowledge the importance of digital rights of journalists and the public more broadly. Curbing journalists’ digital rights means restricting the public’s right to know and damaging the freedom of media. Moreover, the importance of Internet freedom is not just limited to the journalists’ digital rights (such as online freedom of expression and access to information). Restraining Internet freedom harmfully affect many other rights – in domains like education, the economy, health, women’s rights, public engagement in political discourse, freedom of association and peaceful assembly – and reduces the overall quality of life for masses.

This study invokes Pakistan’s authorities to respect and recognize the importance of the Internet freedom as a facilitator of not only social, political and economic progress, but also to buttress journalists’ digital rights and the freedom of media – especially in digital realm. The author recommends regulatory reforms in order to establish conceptual clarity around the parameters of journalists’ digital rights and protection, thereby to foster free and safer journalistic practice in the country. As far as the Internet freedom is concerned, it is important to clarify in detail the rationale for Internet shutdown, blocking of any particular web-site and removal of any online content. And such process should be carried out by an impartial judicial authority or a body that is independent of any political, commercial or other unwarranted influences, so as to ensure that blocking is not used as a means of censorship.

One would recommend safeguarding the Internet freedom, in Pakistan, by removing restrictions on accessing the Internet. Though this could be idealistic to recommend within the context of Pakistan, which restricts fundamental rights based on religious, political and cultural reasons. Nevertheless, it is suggested to develop a culturally customized regulatory framework that respects religion
and social norms, but it does not abuse journalists’ and public’s digital rights for political reasons. To sum up, Pakistan’s journalists’ unions, academia and NGOs should work together to raise their voice for journalists’ digital rights by linking it to the freedom of media and other human rights (such as right to privacy); document actively about how the state authorities violate the basic right of free expression and opinion by blocking content on the Internet; and unapologetically denounce every government’s action which goes against the basic right of free speech guaranteed to the citizens of Pakistan.

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The rise of digital authoritarianism: Evolving threats to media and Internet freedoms in Pakistan

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Gender equality for sustainable development: Analysis of local journalists’ role in Bangladesh

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Abstract
Gender discrimination turns women and girls into a part of a marginalized community. As a traditional value-centric and gender biased society, people in Bangladesh undervalue the contribution of women in family and community. Goal five of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nevertheless, calls directly for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Some analysts also intend that gender equality is connected with achieving all the 17 goals of SDGs. As such, promoting gender equality through media portrayal is a key to the sustainable development of Bangladesh. Different literature also focused on media professionals’ responsibilities for eliminating gender-based discrimination. However, media mainly give more concentration on the central or core level issues of society. Thus, the representation of local or peripheral gender issues in media remains poor. Media professionals, local journalists in particular, could play a significant role in promoting local gender equality issues. Under the given context this study aims to analyze to what extent the local journalists play roles in achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Incorporating a multi-level social ecological framework, this study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Employing convenience sampling, 32 local journalists from different media in Chittagong city, a Southeastern coastal city of Bangladesh, were surveyed. In addition, five in-depth interviews from gender and media analysts were taken.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented by the author at the 4th Annual Conference on Social Research in Bangladesh held on November 2, 2019 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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using purposive sampling. The findings of the study demonstrated that based on journalistic principles a significant portion of local journalists plays a positive role to promote local gender issues from the individual level to the policy level. Thus, they accelerate the course of achieving sustainable development goals. This study also suggests guidelines for the policymakers to use local journalists for promoting gender equality at the local level.

**Keywords**
Bangladesh, gender equality, local journalists, SDGs, SEM.

**Introduction**
The importance of gender equality, women’s empowerment, and the realization of women’s rights in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) have been increasingly recognized in recent decades (UN Women, 2014). But surprisingly, gender-based discrimination and inequalities are still very much apparent in many developing societies, although their governments are working to overcome the challenge (Bayeh, 2016). In these unprivileged societies, unfortunately, women and girls are considered marginalized communities who are deprived of their basic human rights and opportunities. As a patriarchal value-centric and gender biased traditional society, it is a common scenario in the economic and social system of Bangladesh (Farhana & Stephen, 2019). In the country, gender differences, resulting from social restrictions and patriarchal norms and traditions, are still in existence in most families. Compared to the core level (e.g. urban areas), the condition is relatively more severe in unprivileged peripheral or local level (e.g. rural areas) of the country (Karim et. al., 2018).

As gender equality is a human rights principle, a precondition for sustainable people-centered development and it is a goal in and of itself (UNESCO, 2019), therefore, achieving gender equality at the marginalized rural or local level of Bangladesh has become the main concern in terms of development initiatives. Goal five of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in this perspective, calls directly for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls in all spheres of society. Furthermore, some studies and papers also intend that achieving gender equality is connected with achieving all the 17 goals of SDGs and it accelerates various aspects of sustainable development (Dugarova, 2018; Panda, 2019).

However, for achieving gender equality and empowering women, media professionals as leading characters should provide a balanced portrayal of women and girls’ issues on media. They can promote sustainable development
in society through women-centric media coverage in a proper manner. Realizing the significance of gender equality and women empowerment for accelerating sustainable development, a number of international bodies focused on the media’s responsibilities for raising awareness about gender-based discrimination. For instance, the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG) at a conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research has emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality through mass media (UNESCO, 2016). Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women has also suggested developing strategies for the media to ensure that women’s needs and concerns are properly reflected and promoting balanced and diverse portrayals of women by the media (UN, 1995). But, the media mainly emphasize the core level subjects and issues of society. Thus, the representation of local or peripheral gender issues in media remains poor.

Media professionals, particularly, local journalists as the change agent could play a significant role to promote local gender issues for equal access of marginal women to opportunities like education, health care, decent work, decision making, and political, social and economic participation. A nationwide survey on Chinese journalists’ perceptions and attitudes about gender equality and professional practices revealed 83.2% of the respondents believe that media as well as journalists can play an important role in promoting gender equality (Chen, 2017). Moreover, Narayana & Ahamad (2016) suggested that the powerful and positive role the media can play in women empowerment and gender equality should be supported and further explored.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in the last two decades in improving the lives of women and girls and reducing gender gaps. Despite efforts by the government and non-governmental bodies to ensure gender equality in all spheres of society, many women at the local level of Bangladesh are still struggling to establish their rights. Discriminatory socioeconomic practices often hamper equal access of women to social benefits. As such, gender gaps are extending and this situation is weakening the progress in achieving global sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. In order to ensure women’s empowerment and improve their status through the reduction of gender-based gaps, Bangladeshi journalists might promote local gender equality issues as the country’s news media system has a wider scope than before. So, it is important to identify and analyze local journalists’ role in promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. Such rationale inspires the researcher to undertake the study in the local context of the country.
This study with a quantitative survey on journalists working in Chittagong, a southeastern district of Bangladesh, and qualitative in-depth interviews from media and gender analysts aimed to identify and analyze local journalists’ role in promoting gender equality within the local or peripheral level of the society for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). This study also aimed: a) to know the status of journalists’ understanding of gender equality and SDGs, b) to indicate the gender related issues usually covered by local journalists, c) to assess the frequency of maintaining journalistic principles in gender issue coverage, and d) to identify the aspects of the importance of promoting gender equality to journalists. The following research questions were formed to approach the study objectives:

*RQ1*: What is the awareness and understanding level of gender equality issues of Bangladeshi local journalists?

*RQ2*: What types of gender related issues they cover in their day-to-day professional practice in society and how do they follow basic journalistic principles in covering these?

*RQ3*: Is promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals important to them?

*RQ4*: What roles can they play to promote local gender equality issues and SDGs?

*RQ5*: How can local journalists play roles in mobilizing gender equality in terms of achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh?

**Literature review**

A number of sources pertinent to the study have been reviewed. The literature review finds the relevance of the present study. Studies relating to gender equality and sustainable development, violence against women, gender sensitivity, women's challenges, the portrayal of women and girls on media have been undertaken by academicians’ and researchers’ community. Further, the literature review found some studies related to influences on journalists, cultural and traditional attitudes of journalists toward women and their rights, women stereotyping, religious perspectives and gender which have been done in different developed, developing and underdeveloped nations.

Available evidence shows that media as well as journalists can play a driving role to promote gender equality within society and make aware different stakeholders, such as community members, social leaders, and policymakers. A paper written by Bala (2017) described how media can accelerate the process of women empowerment by making Indian people aware of different social
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issues and factors like gender inequality, crime against women, women’s health, women’s education, etc. Similarly, a textual study by Hassanzadeh (2018) on media and its role in the empowerment of Afghan women analyzed how Afghan women are represented by women’s magazines and how these media impact women’s social condition in Afghanistan. The important lesson learned from the study is that the media’s representation of women can shape the social perceptions and attitudes about women’s role in society.

On the other side, different studies have been done to analyze the socio-cultural context of a gender perspective and its influences on journalists. Reviewed seminal literature highlighted that socially and culturally constructed gender roles and relationships influence the portrayal or representation of women in media by journalists. Postulating political system and cultural tradition as the strongest social factors that influence news professionalism, Zhu et al. (1997) opined journalists under different political, economic, and cultural systems could have much more diverse views on their missions and roles in the society. In a study on the impact of cultural values on journalists’ professional views, Hanusch (2015) asserted that culture and cultural values play a significant role in shaping journalists’ professional views and practices.

While empirical analysis showed that cultural values are considered as crucial on journalists’ news-making decisions on gender issues (Xu, 2005), some researchers described the conscious or unconscious biases that many media professionals sometimes have towards one-sidedly reductionist masculinist perspectives is partially due to the lack of capacity to report on women and gender more broadly (UNESCO, 2012). In the line of the view of achieving gender equality, the importance of capacity development for a range of stakeholders including media professionals was highlighted in all critical areas of concern (UN, 2010).

However, some literature shed light on the media’s transformative role in achieving gender equality for implementing the global development agenda. These sources (UNESCO, 2012; UNICEF South Asia, 2018) demonstrated that media professionals should create gender-transformative and gender-sensitive content and break gender stereotypes by challenging rigid socio-cultural norms and attitudes regarding gender perceptions. Endorsing comprehensive media policies, media industries’ self-regulation rules, and mechanisms is considered a quality pathway by the insights of these literatures.

Moreover, substantial literature (The Carter Center, 2016) emphasized that access to information empowers women and girls to claim their rights and make better decisions in their life. It also helps women to participate more fully in
public life. Grizzle (2014), in an article on media and information literacy for enhancing gender equality, noted that the proliferation of media, the explosion of new technologies, and the emergence of social media in many parts of the world have provided multiple sources for access to gender-related information and knowledge. Stating gender inequalities and gender stereotypes exist in social structures and the minds of people, Grizzle (2014), also described media and other information providers, including those on the Internet, have the potential to propagate and perpetuate or to ameliorate such gender imbalances ensuring women’s access to necessary information.

Theoretical and empirical studies carried out about women and media also provide comprehensive explanations for the gendered frames found in the news coverage by journalists. Pointing out journalists play an important role in shaping and influencing the public’s gender concepts and gender equality awareness, Chen (2017) noted that the perceptions, attitudes, and sheer knowledge level of journalists all are the matters to what they choose to cover, how they cover stories, who they interview, and how they write those stories. Further, it is observed that journalists’ perceptions and attitudes about gender and gender equality arise from their society. Sharma, more specifically, (as cited in Kumari & Joshi, 2015) opined that the prevailing attitude of the society towards women and their rights reveals through the way subjects dealing with them are treated by the media.

Reviewed studies have pointed out that whether and how journalists can exceed the limitations of restricting factors, such as gender, the prevalent gender concepts of the society, and professional practice rules, to disseminate the ideas of gender equality, remain important topics either in research or practice (Chen, 2017). Even more importantly, it has been argued that the promotion of gender equality in general through the implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy should be prioritized by the media professionals (UN, 2010).

In the line with this view, Montiel (2015) proposed to make news media a tool for improving gender equality and women’s rights. However, comparatively few extents regarding local journalists’ role in promoting gender equality had been explored and less scholarly attention had been paid to find out the ways of how local journalists can accelerate gender equality in society. Further study is required to analyze the role of local journalists in advancing gender equality in marginalized local communities so that more rapid progress towards achieving the sustainable development agenda can be made.
Theoretical framework
This study takes into account the theoretical concept of social ecological model (SEM). As an interactive ecological framework consisting of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and policy levels (McLeroy et. al., 1988), the SEM suggests that individuals within the dynamic network are influenced by their environment (Salihu et. al., 2015). Previous studies proposed the use of the SEM as a theory-based framework in examining barriers to social inclusion and addressing the various obstacles in development interventions. Walker et al. (2011) upheld the effectiveness of social ecological approach to promote self-determination through greater social inclusion. They believed that this framework through creating social networks for strengthening personal capacity provides a powerful foundation upon which to scale up efforts to be occurred effectively to improve the quality of life of people with developmental disabilities.

As such, the SEM might provide a framework for understanding the factors that promote gender equality through influencing the actors functioning in all the five levels of the social ecology. Integrating this perception with the concept of journalists’ role in society, the present study sheds light on the theoretical discourse of SEM. The SEM has put in this study in order to provide an integration of promoting gender equality and SDGs within the multifaceted levels of society and to analyze how individuals of the society and the journalists interact within a social system. In this study, the SEM framework presents an analysis on how local journalists through their practices discursively try to influence individual’s attitudes, their interpersonal setting, organizational strategies and actions, community culture, and public policy formation process with respect to promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals. Thus, this study fits in the discourse of SEM.

Media landscape and journalists’ community of studied region
The Bangladeshi media industry has a long legacy of contributing to the country’s social transition. Media have made the country’s people more aware by revealing development issues and guiding policymakers. Over the last two decades, the country’s media sector has expanded significantly. Bangladesh now has 44 television channels, 28 FM stations, 32 community radio stations, 1187 daily newspapers, and over 100 online news portals authorized by the Ministry of Information.3 Besides, government-owned TV channel ‘Bangladesh Television’,

3 Strengthening independent media in Bangladesh. Available from: https://bnnrc.net/strengthening-media-bangladesh/
radio center ‘Bangladesh Betar’ and international satellite and cable channels telecast their programs. This is the general landscape of the Bangladeshi media system. However, as a regional locality, Chittagong has a heritage with a distinct media feature. The country’s first printed newspaper was published from this region after the independence war. Even ‘Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra’, the radio broadcasting station of Bengali nationalist forces during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, started its first transmission from Chittagong.

There are various local newspapers including dailies, weeklies, and monthlies published from Chittagong city. Major circulated local daily newspapers are ‘Dainik Azadi’The ‘Daily Suprobhat Bangladesh’, ‘Dainik Purbokone’, ‘Purbodesh’, etc.

But there are no satellite-based TV channels broadcast from Chittagong although government-owned TV and radio channels have transmission centers in the city. Local newspapers’ readership and circulation rate are higher compared to national newspapers while all the major national newspapers are circulated in this region. Local newspapers are privately owned and mainly focus on regional social, political, economic issues. Most newspaper readers and TV audiences of Chittagong live in cities and a relatively small portion lives in rural areas.

In the last 15 years, the Internet has transformed the media landscape in Bangladesh, as well as in Chittagong. The digital revolution has opened a new platform for the Chittagong media industry. A number of local online news portals are now active in this region. Chittagong has some associations of journalists including Chittagong Press Club, Chittagong Union of Journalists, Chittagong Metropolitan Union of Journalists, and Chittagong TV Camera Journalists’ Association. A significant portion of local journalists is the members of these associations and every day they work for a heterogeneous and large audience community.

Methods
The area of this study was Chittagong city, a Southeastern coastal city of Bangladesh, belonging to distinct demographic and social characteristics (e.g. different social status, conservative social belief and gender roles). Being located in a rigid patriarchal socioeconomic setting, this locality is facing substantial challenges in social actions and planning in terms of achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Moreover, compared to the men, a very limited number of women of this area have access to information on their rights and socioeconomic development issues. Women of this locality have also less exposure to media as there are some considerable social obstacles in using mass
media by females. All these adversities trigger the researcher to choose the study area to analyze the roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality.

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The population of the study was 392 registered members of the Chittagong Union of Journalists (CUJ), an association of Chittagong city-based local journalists. This study selected 32 members of CUJ as the sample at a 95% confidence level. Through applying a convenience sampling technique, these 32 local journalists working in different media in Chittagong city including local and national newspapers, television, radio, and online news portals were surveyed to gather quantitative data. Out of 32 respondents, most of the journalists are male (75%), whereas only one-fourth of the respondents are female (25%). It indicates that journalism is a male dominated profession in Chittagong and females are discouraged or not so interested to choose this job.

Majority of the respondent journalists are in the 26-35 age group (56.25%), followed by 36-45 (15.63%), 16-25 (12.50%), 46-55 (9.37%), and 56-65 (6.25%) age group. On average, respondent journalists are 34.56 years old (SD=10.26), indicating that more young people are entering into this profession. Holding higher educational degrees from college or university, they are also considered as a potential for ensuring gender equality in local strata. The sample reveals that respondent journalists have a strong educational background. It points out that out of 32 respondents more than two-thirds of the journalists hold postgraduate degrees (71.87%), followed by graduation (18.75%), higher secondary (6.25%), and other degrees (3.13%).

Further, the journalists of Chittagong work in diverse media outlets. The sample demonstrates that half of the respondent journalists work in newspapers (50%) including national and local dailies. Across other forms of media, slightly less than one-third of the journalists work in television (28.12%), followed by online news portals (15.63%) including local news portals and radio (6.25%). The respondents consisted of 28.12% senior-level media professionals (e.g. News Producer, Chief Reporter, Bureau Chief, Head of News, Senior Reporter, etc.), 46.88% mid-career level (e.g. Staff Reporter, Staff Correspondent, etc.), and 25% entry-level journalists. Respondent journalists had, on average, worked as media professionals for 6.66 years (SD=4.17), and about one-third of them had 6 to 10 (31.25%) years of professional experience, followed by 3 to 5 (28.12%), 11 to 15 (21.88%) and 0 to 2 (18.75%) years’ work involvement.

Quantitative data collection was accomplished between March 2019 and April 2019 with a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire consisting of eleven (11) questions encompassed demographic and professional questions. To
know the dimensions of the respondents’ journalistic practices to promote gender equality, the Likert scale was also employed in some professional questions. The questionnaire was designed to know journalists’ awareness and understanding level of gender issues and how they follow journalistic principles in covering these. The questionnaire also included questions to describe the importance of promoting gender equality to local journalists and to what sort of journalistic roles they play in achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Using computer-assisted software SPSS, collected data was analyzed doing different statistical functions, e.g. frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, etc.

In addition to this, five in-depth interviews from gender and media analysts were taken to get a qualitative comprehensive panorama of the study. Five interviewees were selected by using purposive sampling. Prior to the interviews, all interviewees were informed about the study’s purposes. The core orientation of in-depth interview questions was on how local journalists are mobilizing local gender equality issues in terms of achieving sustainable development goals. The data of some interviews were collected over the phone and some through face-to-face conversation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data of each of the recorded and written in-depth interviews. The analysis was done manually by the researcher. A major limitation of the study was it had been conducted with economic constraints and a lack of sufficient manpower. The study was also completed in a limited period. So, it was restricted to a limited number of samples. 32 samples might not be enough to generalize the findings.

Results
The findings of the study have been presented under the following subheadings:

Understanding on gender equality, SDGs and journalistic principles (RQ1)
A five-point Likert scale consisting of excellent (5), very good (4), good (3), poor (2), and very poor (1) was assigned to realize journalists’ knowledge and understanding status on gender equality, sustainable development goals, and journalistic principles. In response to the question, most of the journalists showed assenting views. The majority of the respondents (40.6%) indicated that they belong to good knowledge on gender equality and local gender issues (M=3.56, SD=1.076). While responding to the statement on knowledge of Sustainable Development Goals (M=3.75, SD=1.016), more than one-third of the respondents (37.5%) expressed that they have very good knowledge. The findings reveal that journalists’ understanding of the journalistic principles of
promoting gender equality at the local level of the society is also affirmative (M=3.68, SD=1.013) as the majority of the respondents have very good (35.5%) understanding, followed by good (32.3%), excellent understanding (22.6%), etc. [See Table 1].

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Excellent (5), %</th>
<th>Very Good (4), %</th>
<th>Good (3), %</th>
<th>Poor (2), %</th>
<th>Very Poor (1), %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Missing Value</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge on gender equality and local gender issues</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s)</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding on the journalistic principles of promoting gender equality in local level of the society</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Researcher’s own field survey.*

**Coverage of women and gender issues by journalists (RQ2)**

This study exposes that the respondent journalists, on their day-to-day professional practice at the local level of the society, cover diverse issues or stories relating to gender and women or girls. It indicates that covering gender issues is one of the major concerns of local journalists in Chittagong. Findings show that an overwhelming majority of the journalists cover news of physical violence and mental torture over women (90.63%). They also raise awareness about women’s basic human rights (71.88%), followed by covering issues of women’s sexual harassment (68.75%), women entrepreneurship (53.13%), and girls’ education (50%).
Similarly, nearly half of the respondent journalists are assertive to focus on issues of women empowerment in politics, society and administration (46.88%), followed by women’s healthcare (43.75%) and early marriage (37.50%). On the other hand, journalists have less interest to cover matters of religious fundamentalism and cultural subordination related impacts on women (15.62%), women participation in decision making (31.25%), and social attitude regarding the dowry system (34.38%) [See Table 2]. Socio-cultural environments where journalists work, journalists’ own attitudes or views, and media houses’ news selection process are considered as the causes behind journalists’ less interest to cover these issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequencies (f) (N=32)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence and mental torture over women</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>90.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness about women’s basic human rights</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>71.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment (e.g. Rape, Teasing etc.)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women entrepreneurship</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls Education</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women empowerment in politics, society, administration, etc.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women healthcare</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early marriage</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social attitude regarding the dowry system</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women participation in decision making</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious and cultural impacts on women</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researcher’s own field survey. *Multiple answers were given.

Maintaining journalistic principles in covering gender issues (RQ2)

A five-point Likert scale consisting of ‘always (5)’, ‘very often (4)’, ‘sometimes (3)’, ‘rarely (2)’ and ‘never (1)’ was assigned to know the journalists’ frequency of maintaining journalistic principles in covering local gender issues. The respondent journalists reported that maintaining the principles in covering gender issues is a necessity in their journalistic practice.
Gender equality for sustainable development: Analysis of local journalists’ role in Bangladesh

Table 3

Journalistic principles to cover gender issues in local level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Always (5), %</th>
<th>Very Often (4), %</th>
<th>Sometimes (3), %</th>
<th>Rarely (2), %</th>
<th>Never (1), %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure accuracy to report on women</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain fairness when you cover gender sensitive matter</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be impartial toward gender issues</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect privacy of women and girls</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper sourcing in gender related news coverage</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>1.040</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researcher’s own field survey.

The study reveals that the majority of journalists (65.6%) always attempt to ensure accuracy to report on women (M=4.62, SD=0.556) and 68.8% always maintain fairness when they cover gender-sensitive matters while only 3.1% rarely maintain the principle (M=4.59, SD=0.712). Similarly, most of the respondents (65.6%) always try to be impartial toward gender issues (M=4.47, SD=0.842), 65.6% always show respect to the privacy of women and girls (M=4.50, SD=0.762), and the same portion of the journalists always maintain proper sourcing in the gender-related news coverage (M=4.38, SD=1.040) [See Table 3].

Importance of promoting gender equality to journalists (RQ3)
The respondents were asked to give their answer on the importance of promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs)
through the coverage of local gender issues. A five-point Likert scale indicating 5 as extremely important, 4 as very important, 3 as somewhat important, 2 as little important, and 1 as unimportant was assigned to realize the respondents’ opinion in this regard.

**Table 4**

Journalists’ opinion on promoting gender equality through coverage of local gender issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Extremely important (5)</th>
<th>Very important (4)</th>
<th>Somewhat important (3)</th>
<th>Little important (2)</th>
<th>Unimportant (1)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.847</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Researcher’s own field survey.*

The journalists showed affirmative opinion (M=3.84, SD=0.847) as more than three-fifths of the respondents (62.5%) think that promoting gender equality through coverage of local gender issues is very much important for achieving sustainable development goals. Out of 32 respondents, 15.6% think that it is extremely important for achieving SDGs in marginal society, followed by 15.6% somewhat important, 3.1% little important, and 3.1% unimportant. [See Table 4].

**Roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality for achieving SDGs (RQ4 and RQ5)**

The study shows that the respondent journalists in many respects have been promoting gender equality within the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy level of social ecology. Based on a three-point Likert scale consisting of ‘agree (3)’, ‘uncertain (2)’, and ‘disagree (1)’, this section upholds details of the findings on the role of local journalists in promoting gender equality.

Findings indicate that majority of the respondent local journalists (71.9%) agree that they, at the individual level, attempt to change the individuals’
attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment ($M=2.56$, $SD=0.759$), whereas, three-fourth of them (75%) apply self-censorship while producing news in gender-sensitive subjects [See Table 5]. This study reveals that, at the interpersonal level, slightly less than three-fourths of journalists (73.3%) acknowledge women’s voice through their reporting so that other women get motivation and support.

Further, findings demonstrate that more than four-fifths of journalists (80.6%) let the local women and girls express their views to others through news coverage on their subjects [See Table 5].

The findings demonstrate that, at the organizational level, most of the journalists (84.4%), with their reporting, mobilize the actions of women’s development organizations ($M=2.72$, $SD=0.683$), whereas, 66.7% apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news ($M=2.57$, $SD=0.679$) [See Table 5].

Findings reveal 96.9% of journalists agree that they promote, advocate, or support gender equality within the societal level for achieving SDGs ($M=2.94$). The lowest standard deviation ($SD=0.354$) indicates the consistency of their stance on this particular role. The study also found 93.8% of journalists promote women’s participation in all spheres of society ($M=2.88$, $SD=0.492$), whereas, 87.1% make the society aware of women’s rights to equal access to opportunities ($M=2.74$, $SD=0.682$). Significant portions (48.3%) of respondent journalists also agree that they emphasize gender equality issues to advance sustainable development in the marginal level of the society ($M=2.21$, $SD=0.861$) [See Table 5].
## Roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Statements on journalists’ role in achieving gender equality</th>
<th>Agree (3), %</th>
<th>Uncertain (2), %</th>
<th>Disagree (1), %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Missing value</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual level</td>
<td>Apply self-censorship in limited to highly gender sensitive subjects while producing news</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>0.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attempt to change the individuals' attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment in local level</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>0.759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Let the local women and girls express their views to others through news coverage on their matters</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledge women's voice so that others women get motivation and support</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Mobilize the actions of women's development organizations</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>0.683</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Statements on journalists' role in achieving gender equality</th>
<th>Agree (3), %</th>
<th>Uncertain (2), %</th>
<th>Disagree (1), %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Missing value</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>0.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal/Community</td>
<td>Support and localize sustainable development goals through news making</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote women's participation in all spheres of the society</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make the society aware about women's right to equal access to opportunities</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasize gender equality issues to advance sustainable development in marginal level of the society</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy level</td>
<td>Provide information and interpretations to policy makers for formulating policies on local gender issues</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>0.765</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cooperate the respective authority through your journalistic works to implement the plans and strategies in local level for women and girls' development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Statements on journalists' role in achieving gender equality</th>
<th>Agree (3), %</th>
<th>Uncertain (2), %</th>
<th>Disagree (1), %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Missing value</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperate the respective authority through your journalistic works to implement the plans and strategies in local level for women and girls' development</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researcher's own field survey.

This study also found affirmative results on journalists' role-playing in social advocacy at the policy level. Findings reveal that about three-fourths of the journalists (74.2%) provide information and interpretations to policymakers for formulating policies on local gender issues (M=2.58, SD=0.765). Accordingly, 67.7% of respondents cooperate with the respective authority through their journalistic works to implement necessary plans and strategies at the local level for women and girls' development (M=2.55, SD=0.723) [See Table 5].

**Discussion**

As discussed in the literature review, local journalists are viewed as local change agents. They, by their day-to-day activities, can play roles in stopping the persisting discriminations against women which originated from the socio-cultural environment. In response to the RQ4, the study findings have shown that Bangladeshi journalists working in marginalized local areas play some crucial roles in different strata of society to achieve gender equality for sustainable development. They, from the individual level to policy level of social ecological model (SEM), work:

1) To change individuals' attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment,

2) To acknowledge women voice and to let them express their views interpersonally,

3) To mobilize women's development organizations and to portray their actions on media in a balanced way,
4) To promote gender equality, women participation and women’s rights at the societal level to achieve SDGs, and
5) To influence policymakers and authorities to formulate women supportive policies and to implement plans as per them

As a result, the findings are explored in this section in the following five broad themes with references to established literature.

**Changing attitudes and behaviors at individual level**

It is worth noting that to achieve socio-cultural transformation so that women will be considered equal to men, turning socially constructed wrong knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs towards women and gender equality into a positive shift is crucial at the individual level. As discussed earlier, in the social ecological model (SEM), knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs are the typical variables measured for the individual/intrapersonal level of influence. Therefore, the findings fit within the conceptual framework of the study. The results of this study are also consistent with previous research that shows that changing individual’s attitudes and behaviors to promote women’s and girls’ rights as well as gender equality and women’s empowerment is considered a key pathway to sustainable development (UN Women, 2018).

RQ5 asked how local journalists can play roles in mobilizing gender equality in terms of achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. This paper found that local journalists by applying self-censorship in gender-sensitive subjects and spreading women empowerment messages are playing roles in the local community to shape individual attitudes towards women. How journalists influence individuals’ attitudes and behavior regarding gender equality awareness? While responding to this qualitative in-depth interview question, Mr. Sazzad Hossain, a faculty member from the law discipline and a women’s rights analyst, expressed affirmative views to local journalists’ duties. Emphasizing local journalists’ role in raising awareness about gender discrimination at the root level, Mr. Sazzad said [Interview 01]:

‘Journalists often write and tell for ensuring women rights through providing examples of women’s success stories so that individuals in the marginal levels can be motivated to change their traditional and patriarchal attitudes to support gender equality.’

Further, the Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM) provide a comprehensive framework for media to analyze their content and operations regarding gender portrayal in media. The GSIM suggested strategies for the fair portrayal of women through the elimination of stereotypes and the promotion
of multi-dimensional representation. It also gave emphasis on the coverage of gender equality and equity issues as an important and integral part of the media's acknowledged role as a watchdog of society (UNESCO, 2012).

Acknowledging women’s voices as interpersonal influence
Strong interpersonal communication regarding the representation of women in a positive manner within society is an essential one for achieving gender equality. Thompson (2017) has argued that interpersonal factors consist of formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including significant others, such as colleagues, family members, opinion leaders, and friends. The interpersonal level, within social ecological framework, emphasizes external influences on interactive networks. This paper also found that for influencing interpersonal networks through a fair portrayal of women on media, local journalists acknowledge women’s voices and give the women opportunities to express their views in media content. Thus, the results support the expression of UN Women (2018) that it’s important to give women the right place in the media landscape, and their representations must be fair and equal.

It is viewed that media as well as journalists have a substantial influence on interpersonal networks that exist in social ecology. How do you (journalist) consider the interpersonal setting in your reporting? While answering this in-depth interview question, Mr. Imran Bin Sabur, a journalist from a local newspaper provided an affirmative response. He said [Interview 05]:

‘We are concern about interpersonal settings and patriarchal nature of the actors of the society from where we report. For example, people form marginal societies usually do not accept women’s voices in family decision making. In that case, we explain it and try to raise awareness on women related subjects in a way so that their family and other peers not only acknowledge them, but also let them to express their views.’

Mobilizing women’s development actions at organizational level
In the social ecological framework, the organizational level encompasses social institutions and organizations with formal and informal rules and regulations for operations that affect the practice and views of individuals. These factors include the transmission of social norms and values and socialization into organizational culture (Thompson, 2017). It is considered that women’s rights organizations are key catalysts for ensuring gender equality and the realization of women’s development. Media professionals can co-operate these
organizations in terms of transmitting positive social norms and values on gender equality into the action plan and cultural environment of these development organizations.

This paper found that local journalists of Chittagong are mobilizing the actions of women's development organizations in marginal communities as the majority of journalists (84.4%) use their reporting to encourage these organizations to take action. Moreover, they apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news. This finding supports the argument of Ogato (2013) that development institutions are encouraged to work with women’s rights organizations for the allocation of social development resources equally. Seminal findings of the in-depth interview have also shown that journalists have a positive impact on development organizations’ settings. Praising media professionals’ role in mobilizing the actions of women rights organizations, Mr. Asrafull Anwar, a development practitioner from a rights organization, affirmed [Interview 03]:

‘Yet they are playing vital role in fighting the social war against child marriage, dowry, domestic violence against women, women’s empowerment etc.’

How can local journalists mobilize women’s development organizations and portray their actions on media in a balanced way? While responding to the question, Mr. Anwar recommended providing training to local journalists so that they can follow the basic norms and principles of accuracy, decency, privacy, and impartiality while reporting on women. Recommending that Mr. Anwar also told: ‘In order to mobilizing the actions of women’s rights organizations, journalists, regardless of being local or national, must be gender sensitive as in reality many of the local journalists in Bangladesh have lack of knowledge of gender sensitivity.’

**Promoting gender equality at societal level**

Shaping social attitudes, beliefs, cultures, and norms through awareness-raising, advocacy campaigns, community mobilization is viewed as a critical element in achieving gender equality. Moreover, promoting gender equality, women’s participation, and their rights at the societal level is a key to rapid progress in the sustainable development of society. McLeroy et. al. (1988) conceptualized the societal level as the relationships among groups of individuals, organizations, and information networks with defined boundaries. This level incorporates sources of social resources and social identity, which are known to influence social norms and values (Thompson, 2017).
The media professionals through information networks can play a noteworthy role in either shaping or influencing social norms and values that form community members’ perception of gender equality and women empowerment. In response to RQ3, Bangladeshi local journalists stated that fostering gender equality is a significant aspect of achieving sustainable development goals. This study identified that local journalists are facilitating this notion and molding positive perceptions about women. Even, they have been playing a vital role to promote gender equality and women’s participation through mobilizing all levels of people of society. Highlighting such role of local journalists in achieving SDGs, Mr. Shamsuddin Illius, a senior journalist working in Chittagong, shared his reporting experiences regarding gender coverage [Interview 04]:

“As a journalist I always try to balance in gender. For example, if I quote one male expert in my report, I try to give a comment of female too. It is one of the ways in which I try to ensure equality. Second thing is that I try to present the fact from a neutral view not from patriarchal perspective,’ Asserting that Mr. Illius also opined:

‘I believe newspaper as well journalism is the big platform to aware male about the rights of female.’

While asking a question on do you try to make aware the society of women’s rights, he also replied:

‘I don’t directly aware anyone about women rights, but I try to do it by my reporting. I try to cover news on the success of women so that it can remove the traditional concept that women only for household works. I want to show women in a way that they can also march in the society with male with equal strength and capacity.’

This research finding backs up King and Mason’s theory that gender is a socially and culturally constructed identity (as cited in Bayeh, 2016).

**Influencing policymakers at policy level**

In response to RQ1 and RQ2, this study found that local journalists who have a strong understanding of gender equality and the SDGs adhere to journalistic values when covering gender issues. They also recognize the importance of influencing policymakers at the policy level of social ecological frame in order to achieve global SDGs. In the SEM, the policy level encompasses local, state, and national laws and policies.

This paper considers the local journalists as an important source of gender-related information for policymakers as they prioritize women’s and girls’ rights through their agenda-setting role. Thus, through fueling policymakers and
Gender equality for sustainable development: Analysis of local journalists’ role in Bangladesh

Authorities to formulate women supportive policies, they contribute greatly to address the challenges of gender issues of a marginal society. In line with the quantitative results, participants of the qualitative in-depth interviews also recognized local media professionals’ role in influencing policymakers and respective authorities. While responding to a question on the journalistic role, Mr. Mohammad Morshedul Islam, a media analyst and Associate Professor from the journalism discipline, told [Interview 02]:

‘Local journalists can play very important role motivating policymakers in taking initiatives for policy reforms paving the ways of gender equality not only at the local level but also at the national level.’

Asserting journalists have ample scope in depicting the pros of gender equality and cons of inequality, Mr. Islam also stated:

‘Local journalists can promote opinion against existing socially harmful practices and policies organizing mass people’s support for new policies and practices.’

Therefore, the study recognizes Thompson’s (2017, p. 37) theory which states that ‘These laws and policies are the mandates within which society functions and serve to raise awareness of key issues, shape environments, and directly or indirectly affect behavior.’

Conclusion

In the socioeconomic context of Bangladesh, gender equality should be ensured in all spheres including the unprivileged marginal level, if the society really wants to achieve sustainable development goals. Although Bangladesh has significantly reduced gender gaps in several sectors over the last decades through initiating some effective measures, there are still some challenges remaining. According to the ‘Global Gender Gap Report 2020’ published by World Economic Forum, Bangladesh ranked 50th position out of 153 countries globally. In addition, how women are viewed and perceived in Bangladesh is heavily influenced by cultural and traditional factors. It is accepted and recognized by global entities that media can help to form socio-cultural values. So, they support the use of the media as a powerful tool for eliminating gender-based discrimination and promoting gender equality. Media personnel, especially, local journalists by promoting, focusing, and covering gender issues positively can accelerate the process of achieving the SDGs in this perspective.

The findings of this study contribute here as it has identified the role of the journalists working at the root or marginal level of Bangladesh and analyzed how they have been creating platforms to ensure rights for unprivileged women
in individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and policy levels of the social ecological framework. The study has also found that with their journalistic role-playing, local journalists have been changing socially harmful patriarchal attitudes, letting women express their views, mobilizing women’s rights organizations’ actions, ensuring women’s participation in society, and influencing the policymakers to formulate gender-sensitive policies. Based on the descriptive statistics, the result indicates that local journalists of Chittagong city overwhelmingly (96.9%) agree to promote, advocate, or support gender equality within society for the course of achieving SDGs. Therefore, this study can conclude that promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals is considerably relevant to the responsible practices of local journalists. Having analyzed the data with reference to existing literature and research questions, this study recommends that:

1) Local journalists, by their day-to-day activities, should incorporate the factors of individual, interpersonal, organizational, societal and policy level of SEM to promote gender equality for achieving global sustainable development goals.

2) Journalists should develop their understanding of local cultures as gender issues in Bangladesh are socio-cultural value driven.

3) They should follow the proper norms and journalistic principles of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, privacy, and impartiality in the coverage of gender related issues.

4) Obscenity and vulgarity should be eschewed from their news stories to depict women in the media rightly.

5) Local journalists must be gender-sensitive. To reduce the lack of knowledge of gender sensitivity, training and workshops should be organized for journalists.

Besides, further studies employing more respondents and using more data can be carried out to explore the dimensions of gender equality and SDGs in other regional settings.

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Testing the waters: TikTok’s potential for television news

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Abstract
TikTok has taken the world of mobile apps by storm. In a short period of time, it managed to become the destination of choice for most of the young users and it is currently witnessing the aging of its audience. Mass media has started to test the TikTok waters early in 2019. However, there are still very few TV news channels daring to take the risks and try to lure the TikTok audience to television news. In this article we are evaluating the field of TikTok news players and the platform’s potential to become another popular source of serious information. We are closely analyzing the top two accounts of traditional TV news on TikTok: NBC News and CBS News. As it turns out, there is room for traditional TV formats and adapted for TikTok news bits. Politics remains one of the most demanded by the audience topics. And even though young users emphasize the importance of brevity and entertainment aspect for any potential TV news videos on TikTok, our study results show that even serious and least entertaining videos can get millions of likes and views.

Keywords
TikTok, television news, digital platforms, mobile news consumption, traditional TV news.

Introduction
TikTok has rapidly turned into one of the most popular mobile apps. According to Sensor Tower Intelligence, it has over 2 billion downloads worldwide, and in

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Q1 2020 with 315 million global downloads it became the most popular mobile application. Almost 60 percent of its users represent Generation Z (Doyle, 2021), which is a typical story of young generation to be the first to embrace new technologies. However, there is evidence that TikTok’s audience is slowly getting more mature: in the U.S. alone 16.4% of its users are 30-39 years old, and almost 14% are between the ages of 40 and 49 (Nover, 2020). Globally, 18% of Internet users ages 16-64 were on TikTok in 2020, which makes 13% spike compared to 2018 (Mander et al, 2020). U.S., Indonesia, Russia, Japan and France are leading the list of countries with TikTok users (Williamson, 2020). In 2021 TikTok was reaching 24% of under-35s, while 7% were using it for news, according to most recent numbers (Newman, 2021).

Traditional media has already started to recognize the potential of this new platform in reaching new audience. U.S. channels NBC News and ESPN were among the first ones to register on TikTok early in 2019. American newspapers Washington Post and USA Today also joined them later in 2019.

So far TikTok is not even close to becoming the preferred source for news: only 3 percent of adult Americans report regularly getting news on TikTok (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021), and news category does not fall into top ten hashtag views (Geyser, 2021). However, the platform obviously has potential for reaching the younger audience. According to Reuters Digital News report 2020, social media in general is increasing its share as the main gateway for news both for the ‘All ages’ group (up 2% to 26% overall) and for ‘Generation Z’ group in particular (up 2% to 38% overall) (Newman, 2020). And Covid-19 lockdown only spiked the popularity of the platform, as 11% of Americans ages 18-24 accessed Covid-19 news via TikTok (Newman, 2020). This further proves the trend of increased news consumption via Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok among young people. Overall, weekly online news video consumption, according to the same source, varies from 39% to 95% in different regions, with an average of 67% across 40 markets (Newman, 2020).

One of TikTok’s main attractions for media is its storytelling tool (Rempel, 2020). The news outlets that dared to pioneer this platform have generated solid number of subscribers and likes: Washington Post (907K/36M), USA Today (898K/23M), ESPN (14M/900M), NBC News (714K/20M) (*all the numbers are as of April 1, 2021).

This research aims to focus on exploring the niche of television news channels that have pioneered on TikTok and on analyzing the practices they are using to reach the new audience. We are interested in the topics that attract the audience, in the traditional and new formats the channels are using to
produce the clips, in the changing (or not) role of the presenter, and in the video description techniques targeting the new users.

**Literature review**

Media communications studies outline the latest challenges journalists are facing with the arrival of new technologies and widening digital divide (Vartanova, Gladkova et al, 2021). Understanding the potential and the reach of popular online video platforms like TikTok is also an important factor for any media channel in the modern world.

Currently there are several research directions involving TikTok and other short videos platforms. Some focus on studying user behaviors (Wang, Gu & Wang, 2019; 2020; Yu, 2019; Zhou, 2019), others on the addiction potential of short videos (Yang, 2018; Zhang, Wu & Liu, 2019), on political and health communication via TikTok (Basch et al, 2020; Serrano et al, 2020; Zhu et al, 2019). Direct research of official media accounts on TikTok is also starting to appear, but the number of these studies so far is limited.

One of the studies is based on the user-centric theory. It highlights the vulgarization of TikTok’s current content and the dangers of ‘information cocoons’, easily created by pushing content algorithm technology. The main user here is the audience, and TikTok’s algorithms are built to meet the audience’s needs through deep interaction. The author notes TikTok’s potential in enriching the users’ knowledge, providing quality content and adhering to the role of gatekeeper (Yu, 2019).

Wang, Gu & Wang (Wang, Gu & Wang, 2019) further explore user behaviors on short musical video platforms, focusing on TikTok and Kuai Shou. They combine the theory of uses and gratifications with social identity and media law to analyze internet communities forming around these platforms. The authors particularly note low thresholds for engagement which makes these communities (represented mostly by Generation Z) quite unstable.

TikTok and Bilibili are also in the center of studies of user behaviors on short video platforms, which result in pointing out five different persona types based on online activities and creative practices of short video platforms audience (Qiyang & Jung, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

Short videos addiction potential in general is one of the popular research directions concerning TikTok. Some studies point out the whole chain of factors leading to short videos addiction: social interaction anxiety and social isolation, interpersonal and site attachments and even neuroticism as one of the positive moderators of site attachment (Zhang, Wu & Liu, 2019).
Meanwhile, TikTok’s potential for becoming a valuable platform in spreading important health information has already been proved in several health communication studies (Basch et al, 2020; Zhu et al, 2019). Their main conclusion: professional sources of health information are struggling to take advantage of TikTok and missing their opportunities to tap into younger audience. Particularly, one of the studies focused on coronavirus hashtag. Even though the number of posts with this hashtag was relatively small (including the ones in the official account of World Health Organization), they received over one billion views. However, ‘these videos provided little to no useful information’ and represented ‘a lost opportunity of monumental proportions’ (Basch et al, 2020). Also, one of the recent studies focuses on the opportunities TikTok offers to radiology (Lovett et al, 2021).

Things are different with political communication on TikTok. One of the first studies in this direction found political content to be ‘a relevant aspect of TikTok’s ecosystem’. Also, with users below 40 years old, political communication on TikTok proved to be ‘more interactive in comparison to other social platforms’ (Serrano et al, 2020).

Pedagogical perspectives of TikTok are also being explored in 2021 studies. Some conclusions point educators towards using TikTok as a learning tool that ‘enhances creativity and curiosity’ (Escamilla-Fajardo, Alguacil & Lopez-Carril, 2021).

Television news channels and other media accounts on social networks have also been studied (Chobanyan, 2020; Nigmatullina, 2021), as well as some speech strategy algorithms and promotion techniques (Gavra, Bykova, 2021).

Finally, there are few recent studies of official media accounts on TikTok. Their focus is much closer to the research questions we are posing in this article. One of them mapped out the existing media accounts on TikTok (total of 234) and conducted content analysis of 19 verified news media and programs (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio and digital-native). The authors discover different adaptation techniques which make TikTok different from other social networks and conclude that TikTok is the place for indirect and incidental consumption of news (Vázquez-Herrero et al, 2020).

In the follow-up study they focus on 133 profiles of television channels and programs and try to discover their main strategies, although the researchers acknowledge that at this stage it’s too early to talk about ‘strategies’ for most of the accounts. Yet, they classify the existing accounts according to their debut on TikTok, their genres and formats and their subscriber base. They also point out music and tags as the key for navigating the platform and for positioning
TV content there. Overall though, the authors conclude that TV channels and programs have ‘to think outside the box to reinvent television for the social network of the moment’ (Vázquez-Herrero et al, 2021).

In this article we will closely examine the niche of television news and the options TikTok can offer to this segment. We will also analyze some specific practices the news channels and news programs are already trying out on TikTok.

The goal of this research is to find out what kind of transformations TV news channels are using to adapt their content to TikTok’s format and audience consumption habits. We also want to find out whether the young audience is ready to consume news videos on TikTok.

The main research questions are:

**RQ1:** What are the main trends of the TV news channels’ experience on TikTok so far and what kind of dynamics are they showing?

**RQ2:** Which content and formats are the most successful news channels presenting on TikTok?

**RQ3:** What kind of visuals, sounds and hashtags are they using? What kind of transformations are the texts in video descriptions going through? What makes it different from traditional TV news?

**RQ4:** Which news topics does the audience prefer?

**RQ5:** Can TV news exist on TikTok from younger audience’s perspective?

**Hypothesis**

We expect to find that TV news videos on TikTok are moving towards entertainment both in terms of topics and presentation techniques. We also expect to see caution in TV channels’ and news programs’ approach to testing TikTok. We don’t expect to find clear and universal strategy in their TikTok accounts, thus confirming previous studies. Finally, we assume there is interest and demand for news videos from younger audience, but TV news on TikTok has to be different and contain some ‘fun’ element to be directly consumed by the age group of 18-34.

**Methods**

This research was conducted in two stages. The first stage took place in the fall of 2020, when we analyzed the entire content of three news-related TikTok accounts: NBC News (one of the pioneers of professional TV news videos, registered back in 2019), Sky News and RT (Russian version). We also noted the existence of verified CNN account; however, it contained no videos and for this reason was not analyzed. Considering different span of their presence on TikTok
we decided to analyze all the videos posted there through early September 2020. The number of videos in TV news channels’ accounts ranged from 26 to 133.

The second stage was carried out from December 2020 through March of 2021. We revisited the accounts of news channels to check the dynamics of their posts and statistics and to analyze their activity over 2020. We found out that two of the accounts – Sky News and RT Russian – had significant changes. Sky News stopped posting new videos in August 2020, and RT’s news account was no longer available (as of March 15th, 2021 TikTok offers only the RT documentaries channel, RTD).

This discovery made us modify our further focus and closely research two most active and so far, most successful (in terms of followers and likes) TV news accounts on TikTok – NBC News (@nbcsnews, started in February 2019) and CBS News (@cbsnews, started in August 2020). Of course, both of them are not the traditional 24-hour news channels, but rather the news departments of the two oldest American TV networks, NBC and CBS.

To study their activity, we compiled a sample of news videos. We decided to pick four random weeks over the 5-months period of 2020 (since CBS News debuted only on August 1, 2020, we picked the same chronological period for NBC News): the week of August 31st – September 6th, the week of October 5th – October 11th, the week of November 9th – November 15th, and the week of December 14th – December 20th, 2020. The total number of videos in this sample is 159.

To analyze the audience preferences, we picked the top-10 most viewed, most liked, most commented on and most shared posts for each channel since the start of the account activity through December 31st, 2020, as it was crucial for us to understand the topical preferences of the audience and the potential life span of news videos on TikTok. Overall, there were 699 videos in this sample (544 CBS and 155 NBC posts in 2020), out of which we picked 80 most watched, most liked, most commented on and most shared.

Some of the main methods used in this research include quantitative and qualitative content analysis. We closely looked at the format, topics and popularity of posts. We paid special attention to finding non-traditional production techniques aimed at following TikTok standards and reaching its users (using hashtags, fonts, original sound versus TikTok soundtracks and overall presentation).

For RQ5 we also conducted a survey among 291 respondents in the age group of 18-34 from 18 different countries (Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland,
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Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, UK). We asked them about their online news viewing habits and the potential demand for TV news on TikTok. This survey has some limitations: all of the respondents were undergraduate or graduate university students; most of them (85%) were completing their studies in Lomonosov Moscow State University; most of them (98%) were 20-24 years old, the other 2% were between the ages of 25 and 34. This aspect definitely needs further research aiming to analyze audience demand and therefore surveying a larger and more representative group of respondents. Nevertheless, the represented diversity and the general unity in the answers we’ve got so far gives us an understanding of the question we are mostly interested in: is there a demand for short professional news videos on TikTok?

Results

Our research shows that there is definite interest – both on behalf of TV news channels and on behalf of the audience – towards using TikTok as one of the platforms for news video distribution. However, for different reasons the channels are showing caution in arriving onto TikTok. It is also clear that the selection and presentation of news here should be modified by creative young journalists who understand the algorithms of the platform and the demands of its audience.

RQ1: What are the main trends of the news channels’ experience on TikTok so far and what kind of dynamics are they showing?

Back in the fall of 2020, during the first stage of our research, we found TikTok accounts of several large TV players from USA, Europe and Russia: CBS, NBC News, CNN, ESPN; BBC, Sky News, TF1 and RT (only its Russian version). There was no universal strategy, each channel was using this platform for different purposes: some posted news (NBC News, Sky News, RT), some used TikTok to promote their content and drive audience to the traditional TV screen (CBS, BBC).

We looked closely at the accounts of those channels which tried to present news content: NBC News (224 thousand subscribers, 4,3 mln likes); Sky News (18 thousand subscribers, 85,8 thousand likes); RT (nearly 5,5 thousand subscribers, 73,3 thousand likes). This difference we partially explained by the span of their presence on TikTok (NBC came there in February 2019, while Sky News and RT in March and July 2020).

We analyzed all the videos posted in these accounts to determine the most popular content in terms of views, likes and comments and realized that they differed for each channel:

2 All the accounts’ stats here are given as of September 2020.
The most popular videos on NBC News included social topics, showbiz, humor and politics; The most popular content on Sky News dealt with coronavirus news; The most popular videos on RT were about politics and different catastrophes.

We also wanted to analyze different tools the channels were using to enhance the visual and audial aspects of their product. The widest range was displayed in the account of NBC News (Table 1). NBC also stood out as the only account using TikTok anchor to present the majority of news videos.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual and audial content creation tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Channel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual content creation tools</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High quality video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile footage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security camera video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split screen anchor on camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audial content creation tools</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter’s voice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average duration (total running time) of posted clips was the same for NBC News and Sky News (about 15-20 seconds) and longer for RT (20-45 seconds). The use of hashtags also differed for the three channels: Sky News posts contained 1-2 hashtags, RT used 2-5, while some NBC News posts had no hashtags at all (and some had up to five).

Overall, during the first stage of research we came to the following preliminary conclusions:

- there was no universal strategy for news channels on TikTok;
- Covid-19 did not seem to be the main content-maker;
- channels were still testing TikTok ‘appliances’ (hashtags, soundtracks etc.);
- TV channels were cautiously coming to the platform.

When we checked back in the first quarter of 2021 to measure the dynamics of news channels’ activity on TikTok, we noted several significant changes: Sky News
account was still on TikTok, but the activity there was halted (there had been no new video posts since August 2020); and the Russian version of RT’s news account was no longer on TikTok (as of April 1, 2021 TikTok search for ‘RT’ returns only verified @russian_rtd account, which is RT’s documentaries channel).

As we have learned, for Sky News this pause is temporary and is due to channel’s ‘finite resources’. They ‘hope to be able to restart activity there as resources allow’, as TikTok ‘does have value for news’.

Meanwhile, the accounts of NBC News and CBS News kept gaining new likes and subscribers. For example, the number of NBC News subscribers grew by 200% (from 224K in the fall of 2020 to 678K in early 2021), while the number of likes increased by 355% (from 4,3M to 19,6M).

Thus, the answer to RQ 1 shows two distinct trends of news channels’ activity on TikTok. On the one hand, we are witnessing obvious success for the TV news pioneers, which keep pushing their content on this platform. On the other hand, in case of relative newcomers, we are noting definite interest and desire to develop on TikTok, but finite human resources which limit the channels’ options for active and aggressive growth there. Overall, as we are not fixing the surge in the number of news channels and TV news departments opening verified TikTok accounts, we can say that they are still using caution in conquering TikTok to attract the young audience.

RQ2: Which content and formats are the most successful news channels presenting on TikTok?

The second stage of our research focused on detailed analyses of the two most successful (as of early 2021) traditional news channel accounts on TikTok – NBC News (@nbcnews) and CBS News (@cbsnews). Both accounts represent American networks, which are part of the ‘Big Three’. NBC was the first authorized TV channel in the U.S. (started broadcasting in 1941), followed shortly after by CBS. NBC also became the pioneer on TikTok, followed by CBS 17 months later. Table 2 gives a brief overview of some account statistics. Even though CBS News has a shorter TikTok experience, it has managed to gain more subscribers and likes and shows higher activity in terms of posts per day.

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3 From e-mail exchange with Nick Sutton, Head of Digital Output at Sky News.

The activity in the account resumed on July 28, 2021
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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>TikTok debut</th>
<th>Subscribers*</th>
<th>Likes*</th>
<th>Posts per day (average)</th>
<th>Average clip duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NBC News</td>
<td>February 22, 2019</td>
<td>950,3K</td>
<td>29M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23 sec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS News</td>
<td>August 1, 2020</td>
<td>1,6M</td>
<td>106,3M</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30 sec</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*as of July 20, 2021

Our further analysis focused on the 4-week random sample of the two accounts. CBS News posted 131 videos over the chosen period, while NBC News had only 28 posts. We classified the formats used in the sample in order to understand what kind of content was offered as TikTok news. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>NBC News</th>
<th>CBS News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soundbite</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video + music</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur video</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor on camera tells</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still pictures + music</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlights from TV interviews</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video + soundbite</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter standup</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Package highlights</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see, there are only three formats, where the networks show some unity: regular soundbites (used on traditional TV as well), videos without voiceovers (but with background music) and amateur videos. Overall, the networks show a variety of other formats (wider on CBS News), most of which require special production and adaptation for TikTok.

One of the biggest differences between the two accounts is the presence of TikTok anchor in the NBC News videos. The female anchor is young, she is casually dressed, her hair and make-up styles are far from the traditional TV
standards. Her ‘down to Earth’ approach can appeal to the young audience. When appropriate, she uses humor or sarcasm. Her high reading speed is fit for the TikTok format, as she manages to deliver more information in limited time. She usually appears on camera in front of the green screen chromakey or at home. Sometimes the news video or photo is taken fullscreen, with anchor on camera in the beginning and in the end of the clip.

**RQ3: What kind of visuals, sound and fonts are they using? What kind of transformations are the texts in video description going through? What makes it different from traditional TV news?**

First, let’s look at the technical aspects of presenting information. We will go through visuals, sound tracks, fonts and texts NBC and CBS are using to create their TikTok product.

**Video.** As we found out, the channels are using both original and credited footage, but the ratio of their own and someone else’s video is quite different: 39% of original footage for NBC versus 84% for CBS (Figure 1).

![Footage authorship](image)

Also, 79% of CBS footage and only 32% of NBC footage were shot professionally. The rest consisted of amateur video, security cameras footage and various soundbites from video conferences.
Testing the waters: TikTok’s potential for television news

*Sound tracks.* Here the picture for both accounts is very similar: 90% of news channels’ content comes without any TikTok sounds (special sound tracks like songs or movie lines offered by the app). Only 10% of CBS and 11% of NBC clips use these options. Built-in background music is part of nearly one third of NBC clips, while CBS prefers to present most of its product without musical sound tracks of any kind (*Figure 2*).

![The use of music](image)

*Fonts.* We found three kinds of fonts in our sample:
- big headlines usually found at the account page without playing the clip; they function as titles overlaying the center of the clip;
- descriptive banners telling the gist of the story;
- technical fonts (locations, names, file footage etc.)

Big headlines are more popular with CBS (*Figure 3*). They let the users learn what the story is about just by looking at the timeline page. Since there is no need to play and watch the entire clip, these headlines are meant to serve as clickbait. For example: ‘Snow covers woman clearing off roof’ (CBS News, December 18, 2020), ‘Sir Ian McKellen gets COVID-19 vaccine’ (CBS News, December 17, 2020), ‘Santa & His Elf Bust Suspected 🚶‍♂️ Thieves’ (NBC News, December 15, 2020), ‘A Petition Against Boneless Wings’ (NBC News, September 2, 2020).
Descriptive fonts are found within the clip and tell the story to those who prefer to watch with sound off. Again, CBS tends to use them more often than NBC (Diagram 4). 99% of CBS clips come with some kind of fonts, whether it is a combination of both headline fonts and descriptive fonts or headline fonts only. Only 1% of clips in the CBS sample was unfonted. NBC, on the other hand, posts 21% of clips fonts-free and uses descriptive fonts only in 68% of its product.
Technical fonts like speakers’ and reporters’ names, geographic locations and ‘file’ fonts are used only by CBS. NBC does not use this kind of fonts for TikTok, which is significantly different from standard television practices.

Finally, there is one more font-related observation concerning CBS practices. CBS consistently uses red to font Donald Trump and other members of Republican party, turquoise – to font Democrats, white – to font CBS reporters and other speakers besides politicians, and black is used for stories about natural disasters and various tragedies. For all the Covid-19 related news the company picked violet. NBC uses white to font all of its speakers within the big headlines.

Texts. We analyzed all the texts accompanying video posts in our sample. Our goal was to study the use of hashtags and emoji as popular tools of communication with the young audience on the one hand, and to look at the language used to deliver the news on the other hand. As it turned out, while two channels are similar in terms of emoji use, they differ considerably when it comes to hashtags and language.

Emoji. Emoji have become a part of social networks and messengers communication culture (Danesi, 2017; Sampietro, 2020), and they are believed to be especially popular with younger audience (Prada et al, 2018). We expected
to find a wide use of emoji on TikTok platform by the news channels as well. However, only 3% of CBS posts and 11% of NBC posts contain these images of modern communication. Another 71% of NBC posts use the image of photo camera to credit the sources of video (this practice is widely used in social networks). Here are some examples of the posts containing emoji:

*Would this ‘monster wolf’ scare you off?! 🐺 📸*: OHTA SEIK (NBC News, December 11, 2020)

*This #Amazon driver took a moment to #pray after delivering supplies to an infant with medical needs ❤️ #uplift* (CBS News, September 5, 2020)

As we can see, there are definite emotions indicated by the emoji, but they are not overused (in fact, they are barely used at all).

**Hashtags.** TikTok hashtags strategy turned out to be significantly different for the two accounts we studied. While NBC rarely uses any hashtags in its posts (we found just two hashtags (7%) in the 28 posts in our sample), for CBS they are a must. On average, there are three hashtags per post, and 98% of CBS videos contain them in their description.

**Language.** Language is the area where we found significant differences in the style of presenting information. The posts in the CBS TikTok account were far from the language of broadcast news and close to print. The posts in the NBC account are written in the style of broadcast journalism: they are conversational, and they use short simple sentences (Hall, 1971; Montgomery, 2007). However, both accounts use past tenses in about 15% of their posts.

One area where the two networks showed some unity is the number of sentences used in the post description. Nearly all of them conveyed the key information in one sentence. And while CBS uses only straightforward declarative sentences (*California ICU nurse breaks down while explaining the challenges of working through the pandemic. #news #coronavirus*), NBC offers more natural to spoken speech and broadcast language variety of interrogative and exclamatory phrases (*Table 4*), for example: *How much is too much snow? Watch these 8-inch figures get completely buried by the snow in Apalachin, NY. 📸: Ron Murphy.*

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Number of sentences, %</th>
<th>Types of sentences, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another area where the networks demonstrate similar approach is the use of direct and indirect quotes as video description (usually these descriptions accompany soundbite posts). This group accounts for 35% of CBS News posts and 21% of NBC News posts.

*Biden on COVID-19: ‘Let’s end the politics and follow the science’. #news #biden #coronavirus #covid* (CBS, October 7, 2020)

‘Mr. Vice President, I’m speaking. I’m speaking’. (NBC, October 8, 2020).

We identified several verbal means of attracting users’ attention and provoking the users to watch the video:
- imperative mood of the main verb in the sentence,
- the pronoun you addressing the user directly,
- and demonstrative pronouns this/these applying to the content in the video.

Here are some examples:

**Take a moment** to enjoy these undulating clouds in #China #relax#nature (CBS, August 31, 2020)

*Australia’s Gold Coast had a foam party, but it’s NOT what you think! 📸: Kellie Wilson & Seven Network* (NBC, December 16, 2020)

*Kayakers were almost swallowed alive by this humpback whale. 📸: Kellie Balentine via TMX.news* (NBC, November 10, 2020)

This is the area of the most significant differences in the two approaches. NBC News shows more variety and higher ratio of attraction means (*Table 5*).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Imperative mood</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>This/these</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, the use of past tenses, not recommended for conversational style of broadcast news, is slightly more typical for NBC News (18%) rather than CBS News (14%).

Overall though, the language used in post descriptions is simple and mostly conversational. The use of different attraction means and emoji makes it more engaging for younger audience. However, both channels demonstrate different extent of entertainment and serious approach to match the news content of posted videos.
**RQ4: Which news topics does the audience prefer?**

The answer to this question is not very surprising. The top category in all aspects (most watched, liked, commented on and shared) is politics. But first, to get the sense of audience interest, let’s look at the highest numbers in each category (Table 6).

| Table 6 |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| **The most popular videos statistics (2020)** |
| Views | Likes | Comments | Shares |
| CBS News | 15,6M | 2,6M | 61,5K | 263,2K |
| NBC News | 6,8M | 1,4M | 24,3K | 30,5K |

These numbers can compare with views, likes and shares some of the top TikTokers get on their videos\(^4\), but of course they are far from any top records.

As for the topical preferences, in the 80 analyzed videos we singled out the following categories:

*Politics* – mostly public figures’ statements on America’s internal and external affairs

*Covid-19* – various pandemic news and events

*Politics + Covid-19* – hybrid category combining politicians’ statements and actions on Covid-19

*Human interest* – news and events on various topics concerning ‘people stories’

*Politics + human interest* – another hybrid category combining human interest stories with politicians as main newsmakers

*Catastrophes* – tragic events, in our sample mostly caused by natural disasters.

Now let’s look at the ratio of each category in the top-10 most popular videos for CBS News and NBC News (Figures 5-8).

---

\(^4\) For example, Loren Gray’s (@lorengray), one of the top TikTokers’, video from December 5, 2020 got 5,6 million likes and 38,5 million views.
Figure 5
Topical categories ratio for the top-10 most watched videos

Figure 6
Topical categories ratio for the top-10 most liked videos
Figure 7
Topical categories ratio for the top-10 most commented on videos

Figure 8
Topical categories ratio for the top-10 most shared videos
As we can see, for CBS audience reaction is more or less the same: Politics, Covid-19, Politics +Covid-19 and Politics + Human interest remain the top categories for all kinds of audience response (views, likes, comments and shares). It is a different story for the NBC account: different topical categories get different audience responses (Politics leads in comments and shares, while Human interest stories get more views and likes).

This is further broken down in Tables 7-8, which compare top videos in all types of audience reactions. As we can see, the popularity of the top six videos for CBS is identical in terms of views, likes, comments and shares. People watch, like, comment and share the same type of content. Only four videos (#7-10) get somewhat different audience response. With NBC there is far more diversity (#4-10), and different types of content get different audience response. This can also be explained by the fact that CBS content is mostly political and less diverse to begin with.

**Table 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video rating</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Shares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
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<tr>
<td>10th</td>
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</tbody>
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Sustained in 4 categories
Sustained in 3 categories
Sustained in 2 categories
1 category only
Table 8

The most popular videos diversity (NBC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video rating</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Shares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sustained in 4 categories
Sustained in 3 categories
Sustained in 2 categories
1 category only

**RQ5: Can TV news exist on TikTok from younger audience’s perspective?**

Finally, we decided to survey the potential audience in the targeted age groups of 18-14 and 25-34 and find out whether TV news is suitable for TikTok. We got 291 responses from 18 different countries (geographically we covered Europe, Russia, Asia, North and South America).

Overall, 74% of respondents watch news videos online, 14% prefer to read the news, and the rest are not interested in online news consumption at all. Those who do watch news videos prefer to do so on YouTube (43%) or Instagram (19%). Less popular responses included Telegram and Facebook. Only 1.5% of respondents named TikTok as the platform of choice for news consumption.

One of the key questions in the survey was: ‘Can TV news exist on TikTok?’ As we found out, almost 75% of key demo agreed that in some form there is future for TV news on TikTok (Figure 9).
Here are some of the arguments we have received supporting the distribution of television news on TikTok:

- ‘It’s important for Generation Z. We can no longer consume 10-15-minute news. News has to be short, with pictures and interesting sound track’;
- ‘If people are ok with one-line news from online aggregators, why won’t 15 seconds on TikTok be enough?’;
- ‘Not only news – talk shows and entertainment programs can exist on TikTok. The more information you pack into short amount of time, the better’;
- ‘Short news about sports, culture and lifestyle would be quite good on TikTok’;

The ways to adapt the traditional news to TikTok, as seen by younger audience, are:

- ‘Show news as super-fast changing pictures with clickbait headlines’;
- ‘In 30 seconds give the gist of the most important and most sensational stuff’;
- ‘Use more memes and jokes. Use only vertical videos’;
- ‘Traditional TV-reports won’t work, but pictures with fonts will’;
- ‘A news piece can be presented as text with visual footage and music’;
- ‘No anchors, present news with text (both voiceover and fonts)’;
- ‘News on TikTok will work ‘only for quick updates and not a full story’.

Among the arguments we received against news videos on TikTok are:

- ‘We’ve got too much news everywhere. At least one platform has to remain news-free’;
• ‘TikTok is for entertainment, it won’t work for serious news’;
• ‘Neither TikTok nor news need this. It’s a bad idea to force the union of two completely different formats’;
• ‘People come here to relax, not to watch the news’;
• ‘TikTok can’t be a credible source for mainstream news, maybe for a selected crowd but personally I can’t take it seriously’;
• ‘You need a team of creative and motivated young people to make this work. [Russian] federal channels prefer old-fashioned methods, they change absolutely nothing in their programming’.

As we can see, the bottom line of news videos on TikTok for the younger audience comes to sensation, shortness and fun. It is not about in-depth reports, traditional and serious news, it is not about professional voiceovers of trained reporters and anchors, and it is not about traditional video editing techniques, where the frames are held for at least 3-4 seconds. It is about dynamics and entertainment, which are still widely associated with this platform.

Conclusions
To sum up, we can state that our hypothesis was mostly verified. It is obvious that TV news channels so far are very cautious about coming to TikTok, although some are starting to recognize the potential and are willing to put resources into this early testing stage.

There is no universal strategy for TikTok news content production, however there are some common trends that we are seeing in the accounts we analyzed: putting the stakes into political content, which remains highly popular with the users; posting soundbites, amateur video and video without voiceovers as some of the formats. Overall, we are noting a mix of traditional TV (regular soundbites) and adapted formats (brief highlights cut from reporters’ packages, new anchor presentation style, heavy fonting).

Another trend is the shift in storytelling instruments: it is moving from spoken word (voiceover) towards written word (font), thus limiting the audial aspect of television to background music and TikTok sounds. This accommodates users to watch news clips with sound off without missing important information (which is also the trend for most of social networks today). The anchor role is also undergoing some crucial changes: from complete removal to transformation into casual ‘anchor-blogger’ type presenter, who is trying to inform and entertain at the same time.

Entertainment part is one of the must-have attributes the young audience wants to see in TikTok news formats. In fact, the ideal news video, in the eyes of young consumers, must be short but informative, with information presented textually in
fonts over interesting pictures rather than voiced over by anchors. This is definitely a challenge for TV channels, especially when it comes to serious news stories.

In this respect news channels are trying to find the right note in post descriptions, where the scarce use of emoji reflects the dilemma between serious and entertaining presentation. The language in post descriptions so far is a blend of conversational (TV) and official (newspapers) style and remains one of the areas for development.

Finally, active use of hashtags shows more success in terms of likes and views (CBS News) as opposed to poor hashtags use (NBC News).

So, how do these TV news accounts fit in within the rest of the TikTok trends and news media experiences on this platform? On the one hand, with NBC News and CBS News there is definite attempt to communicate news-related information in the short form, which makes them stand out from, for example legacy newspapers like The Washington Post or New York Post. The latter are mostly exploring the entertainment aspect of TikTok and producing soft news content or viral videos loosely related to news (Klug, 2020). On the other hand, certain rules of TikTok behavior – short form of videos and their predominantly entertaining bias – set their limits for storytelling instruments and topical variety. Hence, the abandonment of voiceover narrative, the use of TikTok sounds, the new presenter techniques incorporating humor when possible and some sensational soft news content along with popular mostly political news agenda.

These early experiences combined with our survey results prove that TikTok can very well be a platform for quick and attractive ways to tell the news, but the traditional TV networks have to further explore the reinvention of television for social networks and find more ways to combine traditional content production with modern ‘on the go’ content consumption.

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The manuscript should be typed in 1,5-spacing on one side of the paper only, using Times New Roman 14 font. Margins are 2 cm on all sides. Tables and figures (illustrations) should be embedded into the text.

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