

**Experience of interning at the *Dhaka Tribune***

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Tazkira Shafat Sattar

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## 1. Introduction

I had heard about the *Dhaka Tribune* as soon as it launched on April of 2013, and from the very beginning, noticed the huge online presence it garnered. It was the new paper with a fresh, young voice, so typically, I was quite excited to be able to do my internship there.

I joined the *Dhaka Tribune* as an intern for the op-ed team. The current op-ed editor, Abak Hussain, was my supervisor and he and I were working together to bring out that page every day, seven days a week.

My interest in the *Dhaka Tribune* was mostly because its target audience is the younger generation. With more and more young people being encouraged to leave this country due to the poor political and economic situation, I was eager to be part of a team that was bringing the younger citizens of the country into the political and social debate.

I had a meeting with the editor of the paper, Zafar Sobhan, on my first day. I was selected to be part of the Op-ed team. I came back the following day, my first day on the job. I was lost, but I had a great supervisor showing me the ins and outs of the editing and layout work. Over the course of a few days, the most important thing, I learned, was to be politically sensitive to avoid any legal trouble.

## 2. History

The *Dhaka Tribune* is a relatively new paper, having only been in circulation for two years. They are funded by Kazi Farms Group and Gemcon Group.

The editor and publisher are convinced that Bangladesh is changing and that it is time for a new generation of Bangladeshis to be heard, for their vision for our country to be promoted. *Dhaka Tribune* wants to be the platform for that new voice and vision.

The editorial team of the *Dhaka Tribune* is absolutely committed to bringing unbiased news to its readers to inform them of the public debate and enabling citizens to make educated choices.

Like most good newspapers, their pledge is to seek the truth, deliver the facts, and offer relevant context and analysis where appropriate. They aim to be objective and fair in the delivery of such news, and to include all relevant opinions and ensure that no significant strand of thought is neglected. Their aim is to practice journalism that is professional, reliable, dependable, and transparent.

They want to enable maximum participation in the national dialogue, and to lead to collective decisions that will be driven by a new generation's vision of the country, not the biases of any political party or coterie.

*Dhaka Tribune* believes as a new generation comes of age, and soars to new heights, they will accomplish great things. And they want to be part of that journey.

### 3. Editing Op-eds

My first day on the job, I was given the task of editing a copy which was easily one of the most poorly written pieces I have ever come across. But it was politically relevant, and so we decided to do a thorough edit, clean it up a bit, and publish the piece.

It took me some time, but I managed to go through the 1500-word document and bring some sense to it. By the end, it had reduced in size by half.

Eventually, I realized most op-eds do not require such thorough editing. A primary focus of my job was to go through all the opinion pieces we were sent and figure out which ones are worth printing. There were two criteria: Good English and topicality.

Now those two don't always go hand in hand. Often we would get a very well-written op-ed about an issue that does not really concern Bangladesh. In that case, we would put it on hold for a rainy day – in case we were ever short of pieces to run. Since *Dhaka Tribune* was still a relatively new paper, the influx of op-eds was still a little slow.

On the other hand, often we would receive pieces that are extremely topical and politically relevant, but poorly written. Depending on how important it was to print a piece on such a topic, we would decide whether or not it was worth the trouble to thoroughly edit the piece to make it printable.

Sometimes writers would become annoyed at having their pieces edited too much, but since it's a daily paper, it isn't always possible for us to contact the writer before publication and have him/her approve our edited version for print.

This was a problem that needed to be dealt with sensitivity. We did not want to lose our contributors, and at the same time, we had to work on a deadline. Over time, I learned which contributors were more prone to being fussy over edits and which were not. Still, while working on a deadline, it was not always possible to accommodate their wishes.



#### 4. Learning the house style

I also had to get myself acquainted with the *Dhaka Tribune* house style. All text was to be written in British English, so I had to mentally teach myself to look out for the Z's and replace them with an S. It certainly took some getting used to, and even now, a Z slips by me once in a while.

I had come to work with the assumption that it would be a breeze working in the op-ed section – how hard can it be to edit English pieces? But I was wrong. There was more to it than editing, and even editing wasn't always so easy.

A lot of the house style didn't make sense to me. There were certain words that the Edited preferred to be spelled in American English – like analog or program – but most words needed to be in British English. Since it was also part of my job to do a line edited on the paper, I had to be very careful about adhering to the house style.

This probably took the longest time for me to get used to, especially because most things we read are written in American English and it just seemed unnatural to be to see “realize” being spelled “realise.”

It took me a while, but I eventually got the hang of it and no longer needed to google words just to make sure it is spelled in the British way.

## 5. Using InDesign

Another part of my job was to do the layout for the op-ed page. Layout work is something I found to be much more interesting than editing op-eds, at least at that point when I had not yet come across the many inspiring pieces I have since had the pleasure of editing. *Dhaka Tribune* was still a broadsheet, and the op-ed page carried a total of three articles roughly 800-1000 words each.

I sat down with the graphics team to watch them laying out the page. There would be a four column lead article with a photo, a six column basement piece with or without a photo depending on the word count, and a third piece next to the lead in two columns. The software they use to put the page together is called InDesign, and during my first few days, I was in awe of how complicated it all seemed.

Our editor is very specific about the layout of the paper, and there is a clear distinction in its layout from other local newspapers. *Dhaka Tribune* leaves more white space, the titles use a larger font, and the pages are far less cluttered with articles. Basically, our aim was to make the paper visually appealing to the reader and easy to read.

After a few weeks, I had gotten a basic idea of how the software works by watching the graphics team do the layout every day. Over time, I started learning to use the software myself and it wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be.

Once I was doing the layout work myself, it saved us a lot of time. Since we no longer depended on the graphics team for laying out the page, it became a lot easier to finish our work

on our own time. Sometimes, once the day's work was done, we would edit pieces in advance so that the next day we could come in to work and start laying out the page right away.

Moreover, doing our own layout allowed us to get more creative with the page makeup. We started experimenting and coming up with new ways to place the op-eds. I have to say, this was the most rewarding part of my job at the *Dhaka Tribune*.

## 6. Writing Editorials

Another task I was soon given, but did not expect at the time, was to write editorials for the newspaper. Editorials are the newspaper's stance on certain issues and must be written with extreme caution and sensitivity.

My first editorial – on the government's decision to curtail more than half of the budget allocated for the first phase of the Rooppur power plant – made me quite nervous. It took me a while, almost two hours to jot down only 250 words. It was quite heavily edited by the chief editorial writer, and he took me through the things that I did wrong.

What I found most challenging about writing editorials was to separate my own voice from what I was writing. The editorial needed to sound like it was coming from the newspaper as an entity and not from myself. It is also different from writing news reports which also has a certain voice. Since the editorial is essentially a short opinion piece, it is harder to stick to a formula while writing them.

The biggest challenge while writing editorials is that it must be the house voice, not your own. The language used has to be a certain style, and that did not come naturally to me. I was asked to read some of the editorials we'd printed to get an idea of what it should sound like, what kind of words I should use, and how much to stress on certain issues.

After a many attempts, I had gotten an idea of what kind of language to use while writing editorials as well as what stance the paper is likely to take on different subjects. This [art of my job gave me a keen insight into *Dhaka Tribune*'s policies. I learned that *Dhaka Tribune* has a very pro-business stance and strongly endorses privatization. Even though of of the board

members is also a member of parliament, they are by no means blind to the government's faults and have editorialized strongly against many of the state's actions.

I realized that I found it is much easier to write a critical editorial than a soft or favourable one, but perhaps that is my own bias or prejudice at play. It did, however, help me to understand my own political viewpoint better in that I am naturally much more critical of the government than the opposition, not because I think the opposition is any better, but because the government must be answerable to its citizens and must not take the responsibility of governing the country lightly.

## 7. Collecting Comments

Once our Editor-In-Chief decided to combine the editorial and op-ed teams, I had to learn the particulars of making the editorial page. As the *Dhaka Tribune* was still a broadsheet, the editorial page had two editorials, website and Facebook comments, puzzles, and cartoons.

The two editorials would be taken care of by the chief editorial writer who would assign one of us an editorial and write one himself. The comments would have to be collected from the *Dhaka Tribune* website and Facebook page, and this was indeed an interesting task.

The job was to go through every comment left by readers under our articles – not just the op-eds and editorials, but all news and magazine articles also – and find interesting discussions between commenters about the articles that we could print on the page. There were a lot of dull comments, but some of the conversations were very enjoyable, sometimes amusing.

I became familiar with many regular commenters. Some would always offer constructive criticism and engage in active discussions, while others would only be there to troll. Since it was also part of our job to moderate and generate comments, we started commenting under different aliases and defending our writers from defamatory comments or insults. We also had to be on the lookout for any abusive comments and delete them from the website. Since our website does post-moderating – that is, comments get automatically approved unless the moderator decides to take them down later – certain words were flagged so that they would fall into spam.

Most of the interesting discussions, we found, occurred under the op-eds. This is possibly because the writers tend to promote their pieces and that brings in a lot of traffic.

The puzzles and cartoons are bought from an external source, but one thing that needed to be checked daily was whether the crossword clues were correct and that the answers provided in the “Yesterday’s Solutions” section were in fact yesterday’s solutions and not some other day’s. It is very easy to overlook these little things so we had to be extremely careful not to embarrass ourselves.

## 8. Specials

Soon, the op-ed and editorial team were also put in charge of special pages. The special pages included the Long-Form page, the Heritage page, the Law page, the Career page, and any extra pages for special occasions such as Ekushey February or Independence Day.

Long forms and op-eds are very similar in that they are both opinion pieces written by individuals. So the long form page basically had a single, long opinion piece. This was more or less an op-ed which is too long to fit into the op-ed page. But it was possible to be more creative with this page than the op-ed page because more could be done with the layout. Since the op-ed page had to have a fixed number of articles, there was a lot of special restraints which we did not need to consider while laying out the long form page.

The heritage page was always a pleasure to make. It has a specific contributor, Tim Steel, who works as a tourism consultant in Bangladesh and sends very insightful pieces on some of our country's most beautiful landscapes. This page, in my opinion, has consistently been the best looking page in the paper. First of all, it was not a black and white page (the op-ed page was black and white), and secondly, it would be decorated with the most gorgeous photos of archaeological and historical sites of Bangladesh.

The law page, called "Juris," consisted of legal advice. It had a set of outside contributors who would provide us with material to publish on the page. The kind of content we had on the law page, in my personal opinion, was not too interesting. There would be a lot of legal jargon being used without explanation, which possibly made it difficult for readers who do not know too much about the subject to comprehend what was being said. On the other hand, the articles



were not of a caliber that would encourage lawyers, barristers, or other professionals in the field to read them either. So it was difficult to tell who exactly the audience for that page was.

The career page provided career advice. Once that page came under our jurisdiction, a lot of changes were made. We made the language easier and started going with more lists rather than long articles. Since the target audience for this page was young graduates, we wanted to make it as attractive to them as possible. This meant using shorter, peppier pieces, and eye-catching photos.

The extra pages for landmark events required quite a bit of pre-planning – something we are not used to doing for daily pages. We would have to acquire articles suited for those occasions beforehand as well as commission a photographer to bring us pictures to go with them. The first of these that we had to deal with was a two-page spread for Ekushey February, and we were given this task on two days' notice.

We freaked out for a little bit. And then we had to get over it and get down to business. We got in touch with as many people as we could think of who would be able to write something, anything really – poems, prose pieces, opinion pieces – that we could use for those pages. We also started writing articles ourselves to use as a last resort.

In the end, we were able to gather two poems and two articles for the spread, and the rest was filled up with gorgeous pictures of the Shaheed Minar. The end product was beautiful.

The Arts and Letters pages which are dedicated to promoting aspiring writers and poets also came under us, for which we had to contact a lot of young writers. Book reviews and such were also published there. The layout for these pages is very nice as some rickshaw art is done separately to print on top of the page. It looks very good.

The addition of the special pages brought in a lot more work for us, but no extra manpower. Hours got longer and more hectic for a while until we managed to work out a routine where we could get one extra page ready for output each day without having to stay too late.

## 9. Management

Working in the op-ed section did not mean that I only had to deal with work concerning the making of the page. Every department needs to requisition material ranging from necessities such as computers, A4 papers, printing toner, and stapler pins to tissue boxes and post its. And someone needed to make sure we didn't run out at any point.

The administration of the *Dhaka Tribune* likes to keep an accurate paperwork of all the items that are requisitioned, so I had a lot of forms to fill every few weeks while requisitioning stationary and such for the team. At times, even sending one of the support staff to bring us lunch required filling a form.

Apart from requisitioning work materials from the administration, I also had to communicate with the IT department every time there was a computer or server malfunction. Because the entire *Dhaka Tribune* office works on the server, our day to day work is saved there. In fact, all the work that has been done over the past two years is saved on the server. So, any kind of glitch in the server can hold up our work at a massive scale.

Still, minor server glitches are fairly common. And often, once there is a temporary server malfunction, some computers cannot automatically connect to the server. In these cases, we needed to work with the IT department to figure out the problem.

## 10. Web uploads

Although our web team is quite efficient and always one of the first to cover any breaking news, op-eds and editorials would be uploaded onto the website very late into the night – a few hours before the paper would be at your door. And because there are many stylistic differences between news stories and opinion pieces – namely in the author bio and photos – the op-ed and editorial uploads often had mistakes.

The first thing I would do when I got to work would be to check the web uploads. And sure enough, there would usually be something that required fixing. Either the author bio was not there, or the byline was wrong, or the photo did not make sense for the piece at all. Sometimes entire paragraphs would be missing from the online op-eds.

At first, I used to go to the web team and explain to them the things that needed to be fixed. But it was tedious and wasted a lot of time. After some time, the web editor assigned me my own CMS identification and password so that I could log into the website as an administrator and make changes myself.

This made life much easier. I no longer had to wait till I had gotten to work to fix the web uploads and could simply make the changes from home. This also meant that the length of time for which the mistakes were on the website and viewable to online readers was significantly reduced.

## 11. Conclusion

My experience interning at the *Dhaka Tribune* was extremely rewarding. If I had chosen to go to any other newspaper for my internship, it is doubtful I would've learned all that I have during my time at the *Dhaka Tribune*.

Since it was a new paper and they were short of manpower, they had to give me a lot more responsibility than an intern would be given anywhere else. And it taught me a great deal. As an intern, I was entrusted with writing editorials for the newspaper, and every Sunday (on my supervisor's day off), I was in sole charge of the op-ed page. Very few interns, I presume, can make this claim.

I must also mention my colleagues at the *Dhaka Tribune*. They are a great, energetic bunch of people, always welcoming and ready to help. I was extremely lucky to be put in the department I was in, but I think the staff in all the other departments are just as co-operative.

My time at the *Dhaka Tribune* also taught me to be calm under stress. We had to make pages from scratch every day, and on many occasions, last-minute disasters needed to be resolved. There have been times we signed off the pages, went home, and had to come back into the office a couple of hours later because one of the editorials or op-eds had been vetoed.

It also taught me to be punctual and finish my work under pressure. Working on a deadline every single day means you cannot slack off, freak out, or take time off whenever you want. You must do your bit because the newspaper will have to come out no matter what.