The politico-commercial nexus and its implications for television industries in Bangladesh and South Asia

Anis Rahman
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract
Over the past decade, television has proven its political, economic, and cultural worth as the most influential mass media in South Asia. Taking Bangladesh as a vantage point, the article shows how informal political and economic affiliations have become crucial factors for media development in South Asia. Particularly, the article dissects the ownership structures and the formal and informal politics of licensing private television by Bangladeshi governments between 1995 and 2019 in contesting India’s regional media hegemony with harnessing a powerful indigenous “politico-commercial nexus”. Based on field-based research, this study reveals multiple areas of political struggle, regional contestation, and democratic deficits in the television industry. The findings widen our understanding beyond the bureaucratic processes of media regulation, revealing the deeper problem of unipolar political preconditioning and the increasingly authoritarian nature of the state vis-à-vis the ownership of media and its diminishing prospects for voicing plural and contending political perspectives.

Keywords
Bangladesh, India, ownership, politico-commercial nexus, South Asia, television

Introduction
With the growth of 24/7 news channels in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America in the past two decades, television dominates the media landscape in South Asia. Chakravartty and Roy (2013) claim that despite the proliferation of social media and the
supposed ‘Twitter Revolution’, television remains the most significant ‘new media’ for impoverished billions (p. 350). Digital divides loom large (Pew Research Center, 2018), as television retains its political value as a prominent source of news and entertainment (Shaikh, 2017). This is the case in South-Asian contexts where political and economic powers continue to dominate the television industries (Punathambekar and Kumar, 2012; Rasul and Proffitt, 2013; Thomas, 2014). Chakravartty and Roy (2013) offer an ‘intrational’ understanding of the political consequences of liberalization of India on its diverse and plural media systems, including the television media. Some of the political developments that the authors claim as distinctively Indian, such as the ‘extra-economic logics’ of television ownership and the ‘mixed capitalist constitutions’ of news media, are common across South Asia due to their nations’ deeply shared political histories, structural transformations, and cultural traits, but not so visible at the global stage (Udupa and McDowell, 2017).

This article enriches the discussion from a peripheral point of view by situating Bangladesh’s television industry in the broader South-Asian context, makes a theoretical contribution to the larger field of media studies in South Asia, and emphasizes the consequences of integration of informal politics in media systems – often ignored in conventional, Western political economic analyses. In the past decades, television emerged as a highly influential medium in Bangladesh. With 80% viewership among a 165 million population, political and corporate interests shape television media ownership and consumption (Azad, 2019). Contrasting World Bank narratives on the economic and industrial growth in Bangladesh (World Bank, 2016), television media represents a complex relationship between neoliberal transformations of state, integration of capital, subsequent concentration of wealth, and increasing class inequality (Muhammad, 2015).

A conventional nation–state–centric political economy approach is inadequate to generalize the political consequences of economic liberalization, because of asymmetrical power relations and uneven integrations of the nation-states with processes of neoliberal globalization within and across the regions. Television ownership in Bangladesh, as in India, operates within an extra-economic logic, in which political power and kinships are crucial factors in the emergence and survival of channels. However, in Bangladesh, flexible forms of political affiliation are more important than political partisanship, which enables industry to challenge India’s regional domination. In the era of neoliberalism, postcolonial transformation enabled government to integrate media entities with market forces, while keeping control of television ownership through strict political conditioning.

In arguing these, my study draws on qualitative and empirical analyses into the formal and informal television licensing processes by successive Bangladeshi governments between 1995 and 2019 and their concurrent structures of political affiliation, specifically the licensing practices by the incumbent ‘hybrid-regime’, which appears to be democratically elected but essentially authoritarian (Riaz, 2019). Based on a mixture of field-based in-depth interviews, policy analysis, as well as documentary research, I demonstrate that neoliberalism historically enabled a politico-commercial nexus to emerge in Bangladesh, a nexus which now dominates the ownership of television channels, by adjusting with and responding to unfolding domestic, regional, and international circumstances. Furthermore, there exists an ‘exception to neoliberalism’: regional cross-cultural broadcasting cannot override the invisible power of the nexus which is yet territorially
sovereign. I broaden the scope of the political economy approach beyond the bureaucratic role of the state in media regulation; I posit an adaptive nexus of political and economic power that points toward a deeper political crisis that underscores the media governance in postcolonial states, the displacement of the relative autonomy of a multi-party democracy with a variant of the hybrid regimes – electoral authoritarianism, which is decisively dominated by a single political party. Such authoritarianism, however, disguised as democratic, is as powerful as a dictatorial regime, given that a single person or few members of the nexus make all the major governing decisions, including the ownership of media. Such approach widens our understanding of the struggles for media democratization (Zhao and Hackett, 2005) in the postcolonial nation-states, as well as contributes to enrich the political economy paradigm from non-Western and peripheral contexts.

Theoretical framework and literature review

The study of ownership of media is a common task in the political economy of communication (PEC) approach. The PEC approach is ‘the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources’ (Mosco, 2009: 2–3). Consideration of structural factors, such as ownership policies of media, is vital in this framework. McChesney (1998) avers that the PEC ‘looks specifically at how ownership, support mechanisms (e.g. advertising), and government policies influence media behavior and content’ (pp. 2–3). British political economists Murdock and Golding (2005: 64–67) delineate as central to analysis, five historical processes: growth of the media, extension of corporate reach, commodification, universalization of citizenship, and finally, the changing role of state and government intervention (the latter applies to media ownership in Bangladesh).

While the Anglo-American approach to PEC is a well-studied mode of analysis, it is not free of analytical bias. The Anglo-American tendency is to provide geographically and historically selective empirical evidence from Western history to support a claim, generalizing its orientation and results as universal (for instance, see, Garnham, 2011). Such Western-centric biases are a byproduct of Euro-American epistemological, theoretical, and methodological orientation. Anglo-American PEC offers a Northern perspective: it focuses on the role rather than the nature of the state, leading to a ‘theoretical blind spot for the postcolonial nation-state’ (Zhao, 2011: 561). Analysis should not only focus on the role of the state in owning and controlling communication resources in collaboration with the market, but should also situate the nature of the state in the broader historical terrain of colonial consequences. Analysis should also explain how neoliberalism acquires postcolonial characteristics as it grapples with resistance by postcolonial states. Such an integrative framework is crucial in tracing historical trajectories of transformation of states in the South, South-East, and East Asia – with each state having its own contradictory dynamics in their authority to negotiate the terms of integration with globalization. Instead of reproducing a predictable critique of state versus market, we should delineate the postcolonial nature of the state by addressing the complex intersection of formal and informal economies and politics (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013; Lobato and Thomas, 2015) that governs private media enterprise.
Another shortcoming of PEC study is peripheral myopia. The majority of the PEC literature draws evidence from a select few core and semi-peripheral economies, which have a bigger economic footprint and larger geopolitical impact, with occasional evidence from peripheral nations (e.g. Bolaño et al., 2012; Thomas and Nain, 2004). Owing to a repetitive emphasis on core and semi-periphery states, the political and cultural specificity of smaller nation-states has become marginalized in the study of global communication. A peripheral point of view provides a deeper understanding of the regional and global contexts, truly internationalizing media studies within the political economic framework.

Regional and global contexts of television in Bangladesh

Once, an eastern province of Pakistan (from 1947 to 1971) and prior, a subsection of British India – Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in 1971. With an area of 147,570 km², Bangladesh is almost entirely surrounded by India. From its inception, media in Bangladesh have been influenced by regional politics. If the exogenous factors of colonial rule and postcolonial Pakistani regime have shaped the exterior of the media industry (structure, policy), the endogenous factors of class struggle and cultural politics mold its interior – its ownership.

In the post-independence era, Bangladesh gradually transformed into an authoritarian-capitalist state with democratic aspirations (Riaz, 2005). Subsequently, the media lost its political mission and became highly market-oriented in a short time – same with other postcolonial countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Malaysia (Aginam, 2005; Alhassan, 2005; Thomas and Nain, 2004). In the early 1990s, Bangladesh shifted from dictatorial to neoliberal policies, earning the sobriquet ‘the most liberal FDI regime in South Asia’, allowing full foreign equity with an unrestricted exit policy (Arab News, 2016). With the elimination of this legal obstacle, Bangladesh saw massive expansion in the media sector, with the state allowing foreign TV broadcasting, permitting private TV ownership, and telecasting private productions on state-owned television. The global growth of 24/7 news channels (Cottle and Rai, 2008), the development of satellite communications and live broadcast technologies (Parks, 2005), paired with the deregulation and privatization as well as mergers and acquisitions of media and telecom industries (Jin, 2008), provided crucial infrastructures for the media systems.

The television industry in Bangladesh could not be born if the newly elected Khaleda Zia’s government (1991–1996) did not allow the local business class to enter the media market even though it spelled doom for the monopoly of state-broadcasting. The rise of private television in Bangladesh was also influenced by the successful liberalization of India’s broadcasting market. In the 1990s, India was a parade ground for transnational advertisers marching their way into niche markets. With the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a global political and economic negotiation force, India looked to dominate the broadcasting market in South Asia through its cultural and soft power industries (Thussu, 2013). Notable were Bollywood productions, redistributed through hundreds of television channels accessible to neighboring countries, exported globally. In this context, the Sheikh Hasina government (1996–2001) paved the way for the domestic expansion of private satellite television: a necessary step in countering the cultural hegemony of Indian drama serials and movie channels that serve as Trojan horses for advertising Indian products in Bangladesh.
Despite the effects of India’s geopolitical and socioeconomic proximity, Bangladesh’s cultural industries acquired a distinct political economic root, influenced by Indian media behavior, yet no longer dominated India’s regional supremacy. The growth of television in Bangladesh, while negligible in comparison to India’s 900-plus TV channels, is anchored in national informal political and economic forces impenetrable to foreign owners (be it Mukesh Ambhani or Rupert Murdock). One questions how a country with a highly deregulated telecom market and deeply integrated global trades, for instance, being the world’s second biggest exporter of readymade garments (Roberts-Islam, 2019), maintains immunity against foreign investment in its television sector. We must seek answers beyond the traditional metrics of media economics, such as supply and demand curves and ratings.

From 1997, the number of television channels in Bangladesh grew to 4 in 2001, 19 in 2008, 27 in 2013, and 44 in 2014. Liberal commentators celebrate such growth as an indicator of market takeover. Shoesmith and Genilo (2013), for instance, argue that with increasing expansion of economic globalization, market forces replace state control over media. The authors posit privatization and deregulation as victors; government is contextualized as a repressive authority on the verge of losing market domination. Arguments along this line fail to explain the integration of market and state. Implied, is a conception of media control as a ‘state versus market’ binary – yet, one fails to see how the postcolonial state, adopting capitalism, could serve both as moderator and entrepreneur in the market system during neoliberal globalization.

In the context of Bangladesh, neoliberal globalization has not overridden the power of the state vis-à-vis ownership of television; rather, globalization has enabled the state to perform its role of integrating media systems with global capitalism through formal economies (i.e. advertising and telecom industries) while placing control of media ownership in the hands of local political–commercial elites. In the Indian context, Chakravartty and Roy (2013) foreground ‘informal politics’, ‘where policy formation and political decision making increasingly takes place through non-accountable, opaque sets of ‘backroom’ deals rather than through the institutional structures of democracy’, as a salient element in the context of economic liberalization (p. 357). In the case of Pakistan, preexisting informal political interdependence between the government and media owners dictated the creation of formal media regulatory structures, such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which was crucial for liberalization of the airwaves. Rasul and McDowell (2012) argue that the owner-friendly media policies of PEMRA have resulted in concentration of ownership, in turn fostering a handful of companies that control the majority of private television channels in Pakistan. Such informal and preexisting relations and negotiations between the government’s political interests and the interests of commercial enterprises is a characterizing feature of media policymaking in South Asia.

Consequently, the relationship between television, political elites, and market forces has caused growing concerns among journalists, columnists, and media scholars in Bangladesh. Successive ruling political parties have augmented their political power by welcoming private capital into the party system, using formal mechanisms such as public–private partnerships, joint ventures, and interlocking shareholding. There are trade contracts based on donations and bribes and forged kinships involving businessmen with
extensive private sector background networks (Khan, 2013). Entrenched patron–client politics blur visible boundaries between mercantile and political elites, as key actors represent both sides. In Bangladesh, the integration of politics and commerce has resulted in the disenfranchisement of civil society and community leaders, workers union leaders, women politicians, and grassroot leaders in rural areas as well as many small national political parties – including leftist Maoist party factions who cannot compete with newly minted businessmen-cum-politicians ushering high-intensity private capital and informal networks into the party (Sarkar, 2015).

Competition between rival political parties was another key factor in the growth of private television in Bangladesh. There are two major parties seeking to exert political influence by licensing television channels to their affiliates and loyalists through informal politics. In Bangladesh, there exists an informal power relationship that can be broadly defined as a *politico-commercial nexus* (Andaleeb and Rahman, 2015; Rahman, Reza and Haq, 2017). This nexus is a complex relationship of mutually interdependent interests and interlocking networks between high-level political leaders, media owners, advertisers, and top-tier industrial conglomerates. This nexus elucidates the fluid nature of political leadership and its internal meshing with commerce. This nexus transcends rigid ideological division among dominant political parties. In Bangladesh, informal relations are now institutionalized through the domination of political and commercial elites who, on one hand, own television, and on the other, influence media policy. Within this context, this article inquires as follows: (a) What is the impact of political divisions between two mainstream political parties on the ownership of television in Bangladesh? (b) More crucially, how are television channels licensed in Bangladesh? How do the owners influence broadcast policymaking and television licensing in general?

**Method**

This study offers a structural analysis of media ownership based on qualitative methods. Questions are addressed through a multisite case study using in-depth and key informant interviews with semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires, and documentary research (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). The author conducted four fieldtrips to Bangladesh between 2014 and 2018, interviewing informants, collecting necessary data, documents, and archives. Fieldwork was limited to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, where all television channel headquarters and all government offices involved with policymaking are situated.

Forty subjects were interviewed using a combination of open-ended and semi-structured questioning methods. The participants were senior executives and midlevel television journalists mostly from two highly prominent private satellite television, Channel-i (‘general’ television channels), Somoy TV (‘24/7 news’ channels); senior officials from the Ministry of Information, responsible for broadcasting policymaking; and policy experts and academics. Several senior and midlevel journalists from other television stations were interviewed, yielding generalizability and reliability of data. Interviews with key personnel elucidated data about licensing and broadcast policymaking. One limitation faced with this study is that many interviewees declined to reveal their financial statistics due to owners’ restrictions and the conservative corporate culture. Private TV channels are not bound to release financial data to the public.
Results and analysis: licensing television channels in Bangladesh

The licensing schedule of television channels in Bangladesh can be divided into three batches, based on their year of approval and approving regimes. The first batch of private television channels were licensed by the first Awami League-led regime (1996–2000). The second batch of television licenses were awarded by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami coalition regime (2001–2006). The third batch – the most recent – was licensed by the second Awami League regime. However, there is no singular, publicly accessible document or report that describes the licensing process of television in Bangladesh. As one source in print media warned, reporting on television ownership can be a risky task given that one could lose one’s job or life if the ministers were implicated.

Documenting the process of licensing a private television helps us to understand where, within the television industry, market and state converge. Looking at the hierarchy of the licensing process, one can obtain a bird’s-eye view of the factors of power involved in the process. A triangulation of sources and methods – primary interviews, policy documents, drafts, secondary sources such as government documents, and news articles – indicates that the television licensing process can be divided approximately into two stages: preparatory and processing. The preparatory stage is largely invisible, insulated from public scrutiny and dominated by an informal power relationship, whereas the processing stage leaves document trails and can be traced with qualitative research.

Meet the politico-commercial nexus

The origins of private television in Bangladesh were culturally and economically motivated; however, the industry expanded when it became a tool for enhancing the political influence of its owners. Commercial elites garnered political power and editorial prestige through private ownership of media, cementing relationships with primary (political parties) and other secondary power constructs (businesses). Liberalization was not a strategy for empowering ordinary people but rather served as an opportunity to enrich political hegemony and accumulation of wealth. Post-liberation authoritarian governments of Bangladesh played a crucial role in endorsing a local comprador class (Rahman and Alam, 2013: 291–294) to deal with post-cold war transformations of global economic systems and policies. Growth of the comprador class saw a corresponding shift in ownership of television channels from the government to private–political–commercial hands. The notion of politico-commercial nexus explains the role of the state in reorganizing social classes and production relations with a combination of multiple and dynamic players. These players compete as well as collaborate with each other in the common interest of capital accumulation. The government, no matter which party rules, serves as an essential intermediary between different players in the nexus. The phrase ‘politico-commercial’ contextualizes the economic realization of the political ideal. The intricate alliance between political leaders among the major political parties and the owners of television channels, as visible among the directors of Association of Television Channel Owners (ATCO), is a manifestation of the politico-commercial nexus.
The ATCO

ATCO is an umbrella organization of private television channel owners ‘who are united in the question of maintaining uninterrupted business, not only the business of television channels but also extra-media business that they have, often with interlocking network regardless political party affiliation’ (Interview with Pramathes Shil, senior reporter at NTV). ATCO was founded in 2012 with the mandate to arbitrate the government’s draft of a national broadcast policy. ATCO’s leaders promote the interests of the owners of all television channels and negotiate policy terms with governmental authorities (i.e. Ministries). For example, Mosaddak Ali Falu – the managing director of a top BNP supported television channel, NTV – chaired ATCO for 5 years, although his political party has been out of power since 2007. With the growth of Awami League-licensed television channels in 2013, the prime minister desired a change in the leadership of ATCO and in 2017 ATCO elected a new leader, Salman F. Rahman, owner and chairman of Independent Television. ATCO then elected top executives of Ekattor TV and Desh TV, respectively, as senior and vice presidents of ATCO (Daily Sun, 2017). Unsurprisingly, these channels all have close ties with the ruling party, Awami League. The President of ATCO, Salman F. Rahman, owns the Bangladesh Export Import Company (BEXIMCO Group) and serves as an advisor of the Prime Minister. Although the new ATCO committee has fresh leadership from pro-Awami League television channel owners, its directorate includes high-profile owners and top management from pro-BNP television channels (e.g. NTV, RTV, ETV, Boishakhi, BanglaVision). ATCO directors bring an interwoven synergy of political power that goes beyond the historical and populist binaries of Awami League versus BNP, secular versus Islamism or pro-liberation versus anti-liberation formations of political party alliances. ATCO demonstrates unity across the board when it comes to shared political and economic interests. Two pieces of crucial evidence are in order, as follows.

First, Section 5(a) of the *Private Television Channel Establishment and Operation Policy 2012 (Draft)* proposed that no political party or its members or any organization with political goals or affiliations can be the owner of a television channel. Section 14(g) stated that the total advertising time cannot exceed 20% of the total broadcast time (ATCO opposed both conditions and recommended removing them). Consequently, the 2014 *National Broadcast Policy* contains no restriction on political ownership. Second, ATCO, since 2016, on a platform called ‘Media Unity’, has led a campaign demanding a ban on local advertisements on foreign TV channels aired in Bangladesh – another example of their united political power. Shortly, the Ministry of Information responded by stipulating a policy subsection of the *Bangladesh Cable Television Network Act 2006* to put a temporary restriction on airing locally produced ads on 18 Pakistani and 30 Indian television channels, and threatened cable operators to suspend permission if they are caught airing foreign channels with local ads (Raju, 2019).

The significance of these actions is multifold. First, it shows that the unity of television owners across different political affiliations can influence the state’s policy outcome. Second, the government protects the shared interests of the *politico-commercial nexus* by interpreting the policy criteria as convenient for the nexus. Such practices are replicated whenever needed. The current literature on television owners’ affiliation that focuses merely on political divisions (e.g. Khan, 2013; Shoesmith et al., 2013) misses
this point: precisely that the interlaying of ownership interests – where channels are interlocked in an interdependent network of advertisers, political patrons, and lobbying groups – have the flexibility to coexist and to expand across different regimes. An examination of the licensing architecture that enables political concentrations and burgeoning conglomeration of media ownership, within which television journalism is produced, reveals the fluid nature of the political power of such a nexus.

**Informal and preparatory stage of television licensing: qualify the nexus**

Every television channel in Bangladesh so far, whether owned by a businessman or a political leader, had to prove its loyalty to the government in power, otherwise they would not have a license from the Ministry of Information in the first place. (Interview with Tushar Abdulla, Director and shareholder, Somoy TV, Dhaka)

Ownership of television requires political preconditioning. To become an owner of a television channel, one must first become part of the *polิตi-co-commercial nexus*. The alliance between the political party currently in power and the future owner of a television channel has to be formed before a channel gets approval, otherwise it is pointless applying for a *No Objection Certificate* (NOC).

A simple analysis of owners of television channels granted licenses by the Awami League-led regime would attest to the statement above. Figure 1 illustrates the mechanics: in a successful bid for a television license the applicant must form part of the existing *politi-co-commercial nexus* either through business networks or by virtue of a strong background in politics (better if one has both). The process entails formal preconditions: a trade license from the Ministry of Commerce and an entry in the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms as a ‘Private Limited’ company. Registration requires having a business plan outlining the unique name of the company, the television channel, identifying the chair (usually the owner), board of the directors, 2–50 shareholders of the company, share prices, capital, and so on. This part is visible, and all information and documentation are publicly accessible on request. In addition, the applicants should ensure a minimum networking capacity to penetrate the fiercely competitive ad-market. Owning an industrial conglomerate or a wholesale distributor of transnational corporation products is an advantage in that the company itself will supply advertising.

Once the advertising network is crystalized, the applicant must lobby extensively to all possible political and business connections so as to convince the top leadership of the ruling party of the benefits of issuing the license. It requires at least a full minister (or someone very close to the prime minister) to serve as a ‘referee’, who will also provide the owner future political protection if the TV channel gets in the crossfire of political turmoil. Subsequently, the applicant must ensure – *at any cost* – that there is no resistance against the application from the Ministry of Information, and – specifically – from the Prime Minister’s Office. Otherwise, there is no point applying. One of the crucial elements in the preparatory stage is to have the patience and stamina to keep the lobby group active until the file gets the prime minister’s consent, which will largely depend on the political stability of the country as well as on the prospect of any upcoming election. If all these conditions are met – if there is enough momentum at the Ministry to collate the applications in a bundle – the visible, formal steps of the process kick in (Figure 2).
Once the lobby group(s) convince(s) the Minister of Information to process an application, the Secretary of Information performs basic legal, trade, and background checks and submits the file to the Minister of Information. The minister invokes executive power to approve the license. A rejection-worthy application will not have come this far.

In 2013, the Ministry of Information proposed restricting political parties or their membership from becoming television channel owners. However, contrary to its own policy draft, the Ministry has approved 13 new television channels to owners with political affiliations. The author interviewed Hasanul Haq Inu, MP, then Hon. Minister of Information, asking, ‘What were the considerations and eligibility criteria to approve the applicants?’ The reply was, ‘I approved those channels from my executive power. The Ministry of Information can exercise any discretion of the authority’.

**Figure 1.** Preparatory and informal stages to obtain a television license in Bangladesh (based on interviews with policymakers and television practitioners).

**Formal stage of licensing: essential and bureaucratic**

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The minister reminded the author of the reach of executive power: that these processes are not always codified in policy. While the minister declined to reveal further information on this subject, multiple interviews confirm that the approval of the Prime Minister (Sheikh Hasina) is the most decisive factor for television licensing, superseding any existing media regulatory policies in Bangladesh. Policy legitimizes her approval when needed. Indeed, licensing serves as a crucial mechanism of political control, in which the government, especially the prime minister and the Minister of Information,
enjoy discretionary power to grant permission to obedient and trusted business investors. There is no public hearing, no committee meeting, and no opportunity for the public to participate in the licensing process. Such opaque and authoritarian natures of power speak to the kernel of democratic deficit in media governance processes in Bangladesh. This is evident in Alhassan and Chakravartty’s (2011) demonstration on how postcolonial media policy is still guided by colonial legacy as authorities in postcolonial nation-states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America continue to enforce exclusionary practices. Television was deemed to be essential as a tool of modernization during the pre-independence period in East Pakistan. Both West and East Pakistan television were engaged in propagating the significance of government activities. After independence, with brief intervals, authoritarian governments continued this legacy. Although dictatorial media regulation in Bangladesh ended in 1990, it has been replaced by a powerful politico-commercial nexus within a stringent yet informal authority of the Prime Minister. Once networking conditions are met, political references are vetted and ranked, and the party loyalty of the prospective owner is verified by the top ranks of the party, it does not take long for the Ministry of Information to grant the NOC letter (Figure 2).

**TV licensing by BNP regimes.** With both BNP and Awami League-led regimes, once lobbying reaches its highest echelon, that is, the approval of the prime minister, the licensing process is prompt: ‘In 2013, it took only three days for the Ministry of Information to approve the application for a television channel submitted by the Information Advisor of the Prime Minister’, explained Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, the Head of News at Boishakhi Television.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four-party coalition government (2001–2006) started its nexus by granting the license for NTV to Mosaddak Ali Falu – a Member of Parliament and adviser to then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia – who later led ATCO for 5 years. Within a few years of commencing operations, NTV established itself as a role model for how owners’ political and business networks can influence the selection, treatment, and production of news in most of the television channels in Bangladesh. Between 2001 and 2007, the BNP-led government granted licenses to a dozen television channels (e.g. NTV, Boishakhi, Channel 1, RTV, BanglaVision, Diganta TV, Islamic TV, CSB), but also revoked the license of an influential television channel, ETV, which was licensed during the first Awami League regime (1996–2001). In 2007, the interim government’s anti-corruption campaign resulted in the arrest of high-profile figures associated with the previous BNP-led government (Rahman, 2009).

**TV licensing by Awami League regimes.** The first Awami League-led regime (1996–2001) licensed ATN Bangla, Channel-i, and Ekushey TV. Media scholar Khan (2013) exposed that ATN Bangla Chairman Mahfuzur Rahman – a garments business tycoon and under-appreciated musical talent – got the license for ATN Bangla because of his ‘strong political lobbying’ with the then ruling party Awami League (pp. 82–83). To match the number of channels licensed by the previous regime, the second Awami League-led government (2009–2011) licensed 12 channels, including Ekattor (71), Channel 9, Independent), ATN News, Somoy TV, My TV, Maasranga, Mohona TV, GTV, Bijoy TV, Channel 24, and S.A. Channel. In the third round (2013), right before the national election, the Prime
Minister approved 12 more television channels, including Channel 21, Amar Gaan, Jadu TV, Cambrian TV, Rangdhanu TV, Renaissance TV, New Vision TV, Millennium TV, News 24, Dhaka Bangla, Green TV, and Titas TV (*The Daily Star*, 2013).

**Recurring patterns of television ownership**

The second and third batches of television licensing by the Awami League-led regimes (see the Appendix) were a nuanced gambit aimed at reaffirming the stronghold of television channels: a dual hegemony of political references and economic association not easily dismantled by any counter-hegemonic power, even with regime change. Political power connected to family networks is characteristic of television ownership in Bangladesh. Some television channels are licensed to the family relatives of the top ruling party leaders. The Memorandum of association and the Article of association documents obtained from the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms (RJSC) show that in most cases the board of directors are from the same family and the same address. This includes channels licensed by both BNP (e.g. NTV, RTV) and Awami League (e.g. Maasranga, Somoy TV).

The ownership pattern of these two batches exemplifies the crux of the *politico-commercial nexus*: interlocking media owners, business conglomerates (such as BEXIMCO Group, Square Group), commercial associations (Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry), and of course, top-order political leaders including ministers, the city mayor, and members of Parliament from the Awami League party. Some owners eventually replaced the leadership of the ATCO, restabilizing the inner politics of the nexus. Former ATCO General Secretary Shykh Seraj (Head of News, Channel-i) offers a candid explanation:

> Among the new television channel owners, some are politicians, interested in imposing their own political agenda onto the unskilled staff; and some are business owners, who want to use their television channel as a weapon to legalize their black money and to hide their wrongdoings.
> (Source: Interview with Shykh Seraj)

Indeed, the ‘Shadow Economy’ (Schneider and Enste, 2013) is a defining factor of Bangladeshi capital, compounded with an abundant circulation of ‘undisclosed’ or ‘black’ money. In a 2014 estimation, the size of ‘black money’ in Bangladesh amounted to 5–7 trillion Taka, or US$60–US$80 billion, the majority owned by a handful of super-rich who are entering politics for party protection (Bangladesh Economics Association, 2016; Muhammad, 2015). ‘Black money’ is particularly associated with the growth of the informal economy: neither taxed nor monitored by the government and, therefore, easily invested in the media sector with the help of political allies. The informal sector is complemented and sometimes challenged by the growth of conglomerate ownership, which brings more sophisticated investment from horizontal and vertical integrations between industrial conglomerates and the media sector. These mixed capitalist constitutions of television indicate a variegated interplay of formal and informal economy, in which the latter carries more weight for the portfolio of the media organization than the former.
Politically affiliated does not mean politically partisan

The television industry in Bangladesh, similar to India, embodies extra-economic power gains. These include non-market social relations and networks that surpass the market-based logic of efficiency and profit maximization – rather, organized around political power and political partisanship, caste and kinship networks, and regional identities. For instance, Kirali TV is controlled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), whereas the Congress Party controls Jai Hind TV (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013: 361). However, in the context of Bangladesh, there is a subtle difference between politically partisan media and politically affiliated media. The latter does not entail the political integrity, ideological loyalty, and collective dedication of the former.

As evidence, the Maasranga television channel was licensed by the Awami League-led regime. The owner of Maasranga, Anjan Chowdhury, sat on the board of directors (Bangladesh Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms, 2010) of NTV, licensed by BNP – Awami League’s rival party (now near-extinct, with the country allegedly turning into a one-party state under Sheikh Hasina’s stern authority; Mahmud, 2018). If NTV or Maasranga were strictly partisan media, their owners could not engage in business together as it would stir up a conflict of political interest. Nonetheless, partisan journalism is still visible in some print media in Bangladesh. The narrow political partisanship of television is replaceable: the treatment of news adjusts with regime changes, as with the transfer of ownership shares. Such fluidity allows television owners from different political ideologies to coexist and form alliances that protect their collective interests both within and across successive regimes.

Conglomerate ownership of television

Conglomerate ownership of television is a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh, emerging between the years 2005 and 2015. It took over three decades to soften the ground through neoliberal deregulation and privatization before conglomeration could take place. At present, a small number of corporations (i.e. BEXIMCO, Square, Bashundhara, and Jamuna) occupy a formidable fraction of media ownership. Under Salman Rahman’s expansive control BEXIMCO, a variegated and multifaceted conglomerate owns Independent Television, Muktakantha (national Bangla daily), and the Independent (English daily). Another conglomerate Bashundhara Group expanded its ownership to diverse media enterprises, including East West Media Ltd, News24 (24/7 news channel), Kaler Kantho (Bangla daily), Bangladesh Pratidin (Bangla daily), Daily Sun (English daily), Banglanews24.com (online newspaper), Radio Capital (FM Radio) (Haq, 2011; Khan, 2013). Such a conglomeration indicates that Bangladesh is adopting global trends of vertical and horizontal integration of media, entertainment, and telecommunications corporations (Murdock and Golding, 2005). Similar is the Indian media, where cross-media ownership, digital convergence and content commodification is more common (Athique, Parthasarathi and Srinivas, 2018).

With a combination of conglomerate and non-conglomerate television ownership, Bangladesh shows elements of both non-consolidated and consolidated industry formation. The industry started with a non-consolidated pattern when licenses were allocated
on an *ad hoc* basis at the discretion of political parties. With the growth of conglomeration in the media industry, television has become a site of corporate financialization, in which the government remains the key enforcer of political power. Intriguingly, all the companies received their licenses from the Awami League regime. This indicates that the Awami League, as the ruling political party of the hybrid regime, has an elaborate alliance with the richest domestic conglomerates, and are forging a unique form of politico-commercial power.

**Impact of ownership on journalistic practices**

The impact of political affiliation and cross-industry ownership in television journalism is well noted by the News Editor of Somoy Television in his interview, ‘Citi Group is our owner. We don’t even think about investigating any misconduct of our owner. There is nothing to censor’. Similar concern was expressed by a senior female reporter in another case study in Channel-i:

> . . . I could not report on the recent price hike of medicine which impacted million poor people, it’s simply because a significant portion of the share of Channel-i is owned by the company [Impress] who also shares ownership with a major pharmaceutical company [Incepta] responsible for the increase of the medicine price.

Other interviews confirmed that the ownership of television, advertisers, and the practice of self-censorship by journalists are interlocked in mutual interests of financialization and commodification. The nexus causes an increasing struggle for journalistic autonomy.

**Foreign ownership of television: mission impossible?**

Television in Bangladesh is contested terrain, where regional and transnational forces negotiate and collaborate with state-protectionism. In 2015, the Indian government lifted restrictions on foreign ownership, allowing up to 49% in news and current affairs channels on TV and on radio. Previously, it was 26% (Frater, 2015). Most major US media conglomerates have large investments in India, including Fox (*Star Television*), Disney (*UTV*) and Viacom (*Viacom 18*). Foreign ownership, while allowed in India due to the enormous size and diversity of its media ecosystems, is non-existent in Bangladesh. A high official at the Ministry of Information (Abul Hasan, Joint Secretary, interview) claims that Bangladesh allows a foreign citizen to own up to 49% of a television channel, but in practice foreign ownership of television is subject to conditions imposed by the ruling political party.

However, the nexus in Bangladesh is on the losing side when it comes to cross-border access of television. While the Bangladeshi government allows hundreds of Indian channels to be aired in Bangladesh, there are no Bangladeshi private channels in India. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of India (2011) has reformed its policy, imposing a barrage of strict requirements for foreign television downlinking to Indian territory. While these requirements discourage television from smaller neighbors from coming in, the neighbor countries cannot afford to impose similar restrictions on highly popular Indian
television channels as it will upset the viewers. This is a strategic and asymmetrical move with a hidden pursuit to revive India’s declining regional hegemony at the cultural level.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Drawing from a range of empirical evidence and secondary sources, this article reveals multiple areas of political economic struggles in the television industry across various South-Asian countries, especially in Bangladesh. Transformations of the nation-state in the era of neoliberal globalization are contextualized regionally and globally, superseding binary critiques of authoritarian state versus market forces and political versus commercial power. Unlike the state–centrist or intrastate approach, I show that the regional context is important to understanding a media system, especially where countries within a region share the history, culture, and geography. As well, I show how addressing the issues of informal economy, political affiliation, and informal networks of power (e.g. the politico-commercial nexus) can enrich the political economy approach, and, by extension, our understanding of media ownership, media productions, and media policymaking.

A grounded approach enabled this study to carefully analyze the integration of political powers and mercantile elites into a hegemonic politico-commercial nexus, as reflected in the television licensing processes. This suggests that media studies scholars should critically temper the conventional political economy paradigm with postcolonial scholarship and infuse it with field-driven analysis when studying media ownership, regulation, and state-market relations in non-Western contexts. The value of the qualitative research methods (such as interview and document study in this case) is paramount as the key data for this study is barely available in online or in print. This is especially the case for the hybrid authoritarian-democratic regimes (Riaz, 2019), where the key media decisions and their underlying informal power relations are often kept hidden from the public documentation and remain insulated from parliamentary scrutiny.

As the study reveals, the process of television licensing is politically preconditioned in Bangladesh. Licenses are approved on an *ad hoc* basis, at the discretion of the ruling prime minister and the Minister of Information. This applies to almost all private television channels licensed so far since 1997. The government controls media by suspending ‘derailed’ TV channels that were approved by rival political parties in power. A highly influential *politicocommercial nexus* has emerged in Bangladesh, which is fluid, adaptive, and resilient to India’s regional market domination, being symbiotically embedded within the political and social transformation of the nation-state. The ATCO is the case of such a nexus, where television channel owners display resounding unity when it comes to the issue of the shared economic interests. ATCO demonstrates an interlaying synergy that transcends historical political rivalry and rigid ideological divisions among its members.

Both a non-consolidated and consolidated formation of conglomeration characterizes the media system in Bangladesh, as it does so in India (Chakravartty and Roy, 2013) and Pakistan (Rasul and McDowell, 2012). Bangladesh boasts that it is the most liberal business hub in South Asia for foreign investment. However, there is no foreign ownership of media, as the nexus controls both television licensing and its market. On the other
hand, India enjoys a greater power to dictate the access of television. This indicates that
the mechanisms of media control vary significantly within the South Asian region: when
studying the varieties and vagaries of media systems, the Indian media cannot be gener-
alized for others in South Asia, and vice versa.

The prospects for media democratization are grim in countries like Bangladesh – the
consequence of having a powerful and protective politico-commercial nexus – particu-
larly in terms of accommodating and tolerating contending political ideas and instilling
pluralist values for policymaking, such as accountability, impartiality, and autonomy
(Freedman, 2008). Rahman et al. (2017) showed that the nexus is not only influencing
television channel licensing practices, but is also an active participant in policymaking
processes that influence their outcome. Rahman et al. further revealed that the objectives
of policy committee stakeholders of the National Broadcast Policy 2014 were closely
aligned with the interests of the politico-commercial nexus, while allowing contradictory
outcomes to appear. A crucial example, irrespective of whoever approves licenses or
whichever party rules, channel owners ensure that there is neither licensing fee nor
requirement for deposits. Such intervention was impossible during the dictatorship.
Neoliberal deregulation enables private entities to influence the governing processes as
the ‘authoritarian government in a democratic disguise’ goes deeper into disseminating
power within the market. Duly, television journalism is politically instrumentalized.
Also, an unstructured wage mechanism conforms journalism within the newsroom hier-
archy and is obedient to media owners’ political attitudes. Further exploration along this
line would delve deeper into journalism as an aspect of the television industry, bridging
the macro aspect of the impact of ownership on the micro aspect of news production.

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ORCID iD

Anis Rahman (ID) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7650-012X

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### Supplementary research data/Appendix

**Patterns of TV License Ownership by Political Considerations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV License Ownership by BNP-led Government (2001-2007)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TV Channel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTV (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 1 (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banglavision (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamic TV (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSB (2007)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### TV License Ownership by AL-led Government (second batch 2009-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Channel</th>
<th>Owners/backed by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>71/Ekattor Television (2009)</td>
<td>Mozammel Huque Babu (a pro-Awami League journalist and son-in-law of Mr. Asaduzzaman, sitting MP of ruling party Awami League)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 9 (2009)</td>
<td>Syeda Mahbuba Akhter, spouse of retired Brigadier Geenral Syed Shafayetul Islam, who is younger brother of Syed Ashraful Islam, Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives (LGRD) and former General Secretary of ruling party Awami League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Television (2009)</td>
<td>Salman F. Rahman, Vice-Chairman of Bangladesh Export Import Company Limited (BEXIMCO Group), arguably the richest person in the country and an adviser of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Also owns an English daily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somoy TV (2009)</td>
<td>Ahmed Zubair-Mursshedul Islam, brother of Qamrul Islam, Member of Parliament and State Minister of Law, Justice &amp; Parliamentary Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My TV (2009)</td>
<td>Nasir Uddin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
### TV License Ownership by AL-led Government (second batch 2009-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Channel</th>
<th>Owned/backed by</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maasranga (2009)</td>
<td>Anjan Chowdhury, Director of Square Group, business conglomerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohona TV (2009)</td>
<td>Kamal Ahmed Mojumder, Lawmaker and Member of Parliament of AL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTV (2009)</td>
<td>Gazi Golam Ashriar, head of Gazi Group Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bijoy TV (2009)</td>
<td>Chittagong City Mayor A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury, AL Party Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel 24 (2010)</td>
<td>Times Media Ltd (AK Azad, pro-Awami League businessman and Chairman of Hamim Group. He is also the President of The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.A Channel (2010)</td>
<td>S.A. Group of Industries, one of the largest transport conglomerates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TV License Ownership by Awami League-led Government (third batch 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Channel</th>
<th>Owned/backed by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Channel 21 (2013)</td>
<td>Acquaintance of Minister of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amar Gaan (2013)</td>
<td>Media Bangladesh Limited’s Chairman Tarun Dey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jadu TV (2013)</td>
<td>Anisul Haq, former President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambrian TV (2013)</td>
<td>Chairman of BSB Foundation MK Bashar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangdhanu TV (2013)</td>
<td>Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, Lawmaker and Member of Parliament of ruling party Awami League recommended this TV channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renaissance TV (2013)</td>
<td>Shahriar Alam, Lawmaker and Member of Parliament of ruling party Awami League named as the Chairman of this TV channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Vision TV (2013)</td>
<td>Member of Parliament of the ruling party Sukumar Ranjan lobbied for this channel. Shah Alamgir, the Director General of Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) is listed as the chief executive officer of the channel. He is also a member of the National Broadcast Policy committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennium TV (2013)</td>
<td>Backed by Mumtaj Begum, a parliament member from reserved seats for women, once an extremely popular folk singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News 24 (2013)</td>
<td>Sayem Sobhan, son of Bashundhara Group’s owner Ahmed Akbar Sobhan, is the Managing Director of East-West Media Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka Bangla (2013)</td>
<td>Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, information adviser to the Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green TV (2013)</td>
<td>Green Multimedia Ltd, Chairman, Awami League leader Gazi Golam Dastagir, an MP of Narayanganj; got reference from Forests and Environment Minister of the ruling party Hasan Mahmud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titas TV (2013)</td>
<td>Millennium Media Ltd, recommended by former State Minister for Liberation War Affairs AB Tajul Islam</td>
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</tbody>
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