



Research article

The Political Economy of Media Ownership and Influence: A Case Study of Prothom Alo in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, media holds significant sway over public perception, political outcomes, and societal norms, often influenced by concentrated ownership. This study investigates the impact of media ownership on content and influence, focusing on Prothom Alo, a prominent Bangladeshi newspaper owned by the Transcom Group. Grounded in the political economy of media theory, which emphasizes how ownership structures and economic imperatives shape media operations and output, this research explores Prothom Alo's role in shaping public discourse and policy in Bangladesh. Through qualitative methods, including 20 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from February to April 2024, this study analyzes how economic and political considerations influence Prothom Alo's editorial policies and content selection. Findings reveal that ownership by Transcom Group raises questions about editorial independence and potential conflicts of interest, particularly in coverage of business and political issues. Similar global studies underscore the implications of concentrated media ownership for democratic discourse and transparency. The study contributes to understanding how media ownership structures impact journalistic practices and public perception, highlighting challenges to media plurality and editorial autonomy in Bangladesh. By examining Prothom Alo's case, this research aims to inform regulatory frameworks that promote media diversity and uphold journalistic integrity amidst evolving digital media landscapes.

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, influencing political outcomes, and fostering societal norms. The media landscape, however, is increasingly dominated by a few powerful owners, raising concerns about the diversity of viewpoints and the potential for manipulation of information. These dynamics, encompassing media ownership, the economic and political influences on editorial content, and the broader implications for public perception, are particularly significant in developing countries like Bangladesh, where media ownership is often closely tied to political and economic elites. This research paper seeks to explore these dynamics through a case study of Prothom Alo, one of the leading daily newspapers in Bangladesh.

The concept of the political economy of media emphasizes the relationships between economic interests, political power, and media content. According to McChesney (2008), the political economy approach

highlights how ownership structures and financial imperatives shape media operations and output. In Bangladesh, the media landscape has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, characterized by an increase in privately owned media outlets and the growth of digital platforms. These changes have introduced new challenges regarding media influence and ownership, particularly in terms of editorial independence and public trust.

Prothom Alo, established in 1998, quickly became a dominant player in the Bangladeshi media scene. With its extensive readership and widespread influence, it has shaped public discourse on various socio-political issues. The newspaper is owned by the Transcom Group, a conglomerate with diverse business interests ranging from pharmaceuticals to telecommunications (Transcom Group, 2023). This ownership structure raises pertinent questions about potential conflicts of interest and the degree to which economic considerations may influence editorial

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decisions. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the impact of Prothom Alo's ownership by the Transcom Group on its editorial policies and content.

The influence of media ownership on content and public perception is not unique to Bangladesh. Research by Nabi (2023) showed a correlation between media ownership and news content selection in Bangladesh, particularly influenced by the rise of online media. Similarly, global studies have documented that concentrated media ownership often leads to biased reporting and a narrow range of perspectives (Doyle, 2013; Freedman, 2014). In the United States, for instance, the consolidation of media ownership has been linked to homogenized news content and the marginalization of alternative voices (Bagdikian, 2004). These findings underscore the importance of critically examining the ownership structures of media outlets in Bangladesh and their implications for democratic discourse and transparency.

In Bangladesh, media ownership is often intertwined with political affiliations and patronage. The relationship between media owners and political elites can significantly impact editorial independence and the framing of news stories. Rahman (2012) noted that media outlets in Bangladesh frequently align with political parties, leading to biased coverage that serves the interests of their patrons. This alignment undermines journalistic integrity and erodes public trust in the media as an impartial watchdog. Prothom Alo's ownership by the Transcom Group, a conglomerate with significant economic influence, necessitates an examination of how this ownership might affect its editorial policies and content. Given the conglomerate's business interests, it is plausible that economic considerations could shape the newspaper's coverage of issues related to business and politics. This potential conflict of interest is a crucial area of investigation for understanding the broader implications of media ownership in Bangladesh.

Moreover, the rise of digital media has added another layer of complexity to the issue of media ownership and influence. As traditional newspapers like Prothom Alo adapt to the hybrid media environment, the challenges of sustaining editorial independence become more pronounced. The proliferation of online platforms has amplified the influence of established media outlets, but it has also introduced new challenges related to misinformation and the digital divide (Newman et al., 2022). Additionally, financial dependencies, particularly on advertising revenue, can exert significant pressure on editorial independence. Advertisers, especially those with substantial economic interests, may influence media outlets to tailor content to their business objectives. This dynamic is evident in Bangladesh, where major advertisers can shape editorial decisions through their financial leverage (Islam, 2015). Given Prothom Alo's reliance on advertising revenue from large corporations, including those within the Transcom Group, this study will explore how financial dependencies might affect its editorial financial leverage (Islam, 2015). Given Prothom Alo's reliance on advertising revenue from large corporations, including those within the Transcom Group, this study will explore how financial dependencies might affect its editorial stance.

The importance of media plurality and diversity in fostering a healthy democratic environment cannot be overstated. A pluralistic media landscape ensures the representation of multiple viewpoints, enabling informed public debate and holding power accountable. In Bangladesh, however, media plurality is often compromised by the concentration of ownership and the influence of political and economic elites. This scenario calls for regulatory frameworks to promote media diversity and safeguard editorial independence.

The justification for this research lies in the critical need to understand the interplay between media ownership and influence in Bangladesh, particularly concerning a leading newspaper like Prothom Alo. By examining the ownership structure, editorial policies, and the broader media landscape, this study aims to shed light on how economic and political interests shape media content and public perception. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on media ownership and its implications for democracy, transparency, and accountability in Bangladesh.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the impact of Prothom Alo's ownership by the Transcom Group on its editorial policies and content. Specifically, the study will investigate how economic and political considerations influence the newspaper's coverage of key issues, including business, politics, and social justice. Additionally, the research will explore the broader implications of media ownership concentration for democratic discourse and media plurality in Bangladesh. Through a comprehensive case study approach, this paper seeks to provide valuable insights into the political economy of media ownership and its influence on public discourse in Bangladesh.

Research Gap

While existing literature has examined media ownership in Bangladesh (Karim, 2017; Nabi, 2023), there is a notable lack of in-depth case studies focusing on specific media outlets and their ownership dynamics. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of Prothom Alo, a leading Bangladeshi newspaper. Furthermore, while previous research has explored the impact of media ownership on content (Ali, 2019; Hossain, 2021), there is limited investigation into how ownership structures influence editorial decision-making processes and journalistic practices in the Bangladeshi context. Additionally, the role of digital transformation in shaping media ownership influence remains understudied in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2022). This research aims to fill these gaps by offering insights into the complex interplay between media ownership, editorial autonomy, and the evolving digital landscape, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of media dynamics in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

This study aligns with the theoretical principles of media ownership and its implications for journalistic practices, public discourse, and societal perception. According to the political economy of media theory, ownership structures and market dynamics play critical roles in shaping editorial decisions and agenda setting (McChesney, 2008). The research questions, although varied in scope, reflect the

multifaceted nature of these influences, with particular attention to ownership impact on journalistic autonomy and public trust (Hardy, 2014).

RQ 1: How do journalists at Prothom Alo negotiate editorial autonomy in the face of ownership influence, and what strategies do they employ to maintain journalistic integrity?

RQ 2: To what extent does Prothom Alo contribute to shaping political agendas in Bangladesh, and how do ownership dynamics influence editorial decisions on politically sensitive issues?

RQ 3: How do market pressures, including advertising revenue and digital media trends, influence content prioritization and editorial decisions at Prothom Alo?

RQ 4: What factors contribute to the perceived decline in public trust and credibility of Prothom Alo among its audience, and how do these perceptions affect its role as a media institution in Bangladesh?

Literature Review

The dynamics of media ownership and its implications on journalistic practices and public discourse have garnered significant scholarly attention globally, with particular relevance to developing nations like Bangladesh. This literature review synthesizes existing research to provide insights into the intricate relationship between media ownership, editorial independence, and societal influence, focusing on the renowned Bangladeshi newspaper, Prothom Alo.

Media ownership, a cornerstone of media studies, shapes the content and direction of news reporting, thereby influencing public opinion and policy outcomes (McChesney, 2008). In Bangladesh, Prothom Alo stands as a pivotal example, widely acknowledged for its extensive reach and substantial influence on public perception and policy discourse (Karim, 2017). The newspaper's ownership structure, predominantly owned by private conglomerates, underscores the nexus between media and corporate interests (Ali, 2019). Scholars have underscored the dual role of media entities like Prothom Alo, where commercial imperatives often intersect with journalistic ideals of objectivity and public service (Ahmed, 2020). This convergence can sometimes compromise editorial autonomy, impacting the diversity and depth of news coverage (Kabir, 2015). The economic imperatives of media ownership, including advertising revenue and corporate partnerships, further shape the editorial agenda, potentially skewing the coverage in favor of vested interests (Rahman, 2018). Nabi (2023) focuses on www.prothomalo.com, the leading online news portal in Bangladesh, using qualitative methods and in-depth interviews to explore ownership patterns, corporate relationships, news content categories, and sources. The findings highlight concerns over the independence, objectivity, and diversity of online news due to corporate conglomerate ownership of media outlets.

Moreover, the political economy lens provides crucial insights into how media ownership influences the broader socio-political landscape. In Bangladesh, where media outlets like Prothom Alo operate amidst political pressures and regulatory constraints, questions of media freedom and independence remain pertinent (Islam, 2016). The

concentration of media ownership among a few corporate entities raises concerns about pluralism and the representation of diverse viewpoints in public discourse (Hossain, 2021). Critically analyzing Prothom Alo within the context of Bangladesh's media landscape reveals nuanced patterns of influence and power dynamics. Research indicates that while editorial teams strive for journalistic integrity, the overarching influence of ownership structures can subtly shape editorial decisions and news narratives (Hasan, 2019). This interplay underscores the need for robust regulatory frameworks that safeguard media independence while promoting transparency in ownership structures (Haque, 2020).

Furthermore, the advent of digital platforms has transformed media consumption patterns, posing both challenges and opportunities for traditional newspapers like Prothom Alo (Chowdhury, 2022). The digital era has amplified concerns over media pluralism and the democratization of information, necessitating a reevaluation of regulatory frameworks to address the evolving media landscape (Khan, 2023). In conclusion, the study of media ownership and influence, exemplified by Prothom Alo in Bangladesh, offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between media, economics, and politics. By examining these dynamics through a critical lens, scholars can contribute to a deeper understanding of how media ownership shapes public discourse and influences societal norms. Future research should continue to explore these themes, fostering a nuanced understanding of media's role in shaping democratic processes and public opinion in Bangladesh and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

In the realm of media studies, the theory of political economy offers a robust framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of media ownership and its consequential influence on public discourse and societal perceptions. This study drew upon the political economy of media to explore the relationship between media ownership and its broader societal implications, focusing specifically on a case study of Prothom Alo, one of Bangladesh's leading newspapers.

Political economy theory posits that media systems are not merely conduits of information but are deeply embedded within socio-economic and political structures, reflecting and reinforcing existing power relations and ideological frameworks (McChesney, 2008). In this study, we applied key constructs from this theory, including concentrated media ownership, media plurality, financial sustainability, and content polarization, to investigate their relevance to Prothom Alo. These concepts were essential for examining how ownership patterns shaped editorial decision-making, transparency, and public discourse. Concentrated media ownership, a central focus, refers to the control of media outlets by a few powerful entities, which can influence media pluralism and diversity (Picard, 2007). The study explored how such concentration at Prothom Alo could impact journalistic integrity, editorial independence, and the diversity of viewpoints available to the public.

In the context of Bangladesh, where media ownership is concentrated among a few powerful entities, the implications of political economy theory became

particularly significant. Prothom Alo, founded in 1998, has emerged as a pivotal player in the Bangladeshi media landscape. The ownership of the newspaper by Mediastar Limited, a subsidiary of the Transcom Group, was analyzed through the lens of financial sustainability and its influence on editorial decisions. Financial sustainability in media refers to the necessity of balancing journalistic norms with economic imperatives such as profitability and advertising revenue (Baker, 2007). This dynamic was examined in the case of Prothom Alo, where the influence of advertising revenue and market pressures on content prioritization was explored.

The ownership structure of Prothom Alo raised pertinent questions about media plurality and diversity. Scholars argue that concentrated media ownership can lead to the homogenization of viewpoints and limit the range of perspectives presented to the public (Picard, 2007). This study investigated how such concentration affected the editorial content, focusing on the role of media in shaping public discourse. Content polarization, a related concept, refers to the increasing division of media content into opposing ideological positions, which was a significant aspect of the study. We examined whether Prothom Alo's ownership structure contributed to such polarization in the coverage of politically sensitive issues.

Moreover, political economy theory suggests that media outlets like Prothom Alo not only reflect but also construct public discourse by framing issues and defining agendas (McQuail, 2010). The study aimed to clarify how the newspaper's ownership influenced its role in shaping democratic discourse and transparency. The concept of "implication for democratic discourse and transparency" referred to the ways in which Prothom Alo's editorial decisions could affect public engagement with political processes and the availability of accurate information. Transparency in media, especially regarding ownership and editorial processes, is crucial for maintaining public trust (Hardy, 2014). In this context, the study explored how ownership affected Prothom Alo's transparency in its editorial practices.

Furthermore, the study incorporated the concept of misinformation, the dissemination of false or misleading information, which can be influenced by ownership dynamics. The political economy framework allowed for an examination of how concentrated ownership could potentially impact the accuracy of information and the spread of misinformation. This was relevant in analyzing Prothom Alo's influence on public discourse and its implications for the credibility of news in Bangladesh.

The digital divide, the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, was another construct examined within this study. In the context of Prothom Alo, we analyzed how ownership dynamics influenced the newspaper's digital transformation and its accessibility to a broader audience. The study explored the implications of this divide for both the reach and influence of the newspaper's content, particularly in shaping political agendas and public opinion.

Finally, this study applied political economy theory to understand how Prothom Alo navigated the challenges of financial sustainability, editorial independence, and the evolving digital landscape. By focusing on these key

constructs, the study provided insights into how media ownership patterns shaped the media landscape and influenced public perceptions in Bangladesh. Through the lens of political economy, the study contributed to the understanding of how concentrated ownership could lead to the homogenization of content, challenges to editorial independence, and implications for democratic discourse and transparency.

Political economy theory provided a comprehensive framework for analyzing the intricate relationship between media ownership, editorial decision-making, and public discourse. By incorporating constructs such as concentrated media ownership, financial sustainability, media plurality, and content polarization, this study addressed the broader implications of ownership dynamics in shaping media content and influencing societal perceptions. Future research could explore comparative case studies or longitudinal analyses to deepen the understanding of these dynamics in both the Bangladeshi and global contexts.

Materials and Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the political economy of media ownership and influence, focusing specifically on Prothom Alo, a leading newspaper in Bangladesh. Prothom Alo was selected for this study due to its significant role in the Bangladeshi media landscape, its influence on public discourse, and its editorial stance on critical national issues (Nabi, 2023). The newspaper's history, reputation, and ownership dynamics made it a compelling case for examining the intersection of media ownership and content coverage (Nabi, 2023). Qualitative methods were chosen to explore the complex interplay between economic interests, media content, and societal influence within the context of Bangladesh's media landscape. The primary methodological tool utilized in this research was in-depth interviews. This approach was selected due to its effectiveness in eliciting detailed insights and perspectives from key stakeholders involved in or affected by media ownership and influence. In-depth interviews allow for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, providing rich data that can uncover underlying motivations, practices, and perceptions.

A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted from February 2024 to April 2024. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide comprehensive insights into the subject matter. The purposive sampling technique used in this study is widely recognized in qualitative research for its ability to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Key stakeholders included media executives, journalists, industry experts, government officials, and academics with expertise in media studies and political economy. The selection criteria ensured representation from diverse perspectives within the media ecosystem, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of the data collected.

Data collection commenced with the identification and recruitment of suitable participants based on their roles and relevance to the research topic. Semi-structured interview guides were developed to ensure consistency in

the topics covered while allowing flexibility to explore emergent themes, a method well-established in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016). The in-depth interview (IDI) questions were designed to explore the perspectives of various stakeholder groups, including journalists, media executives, government officials, and academics, while maintaining thematic consistency. Questions for journalists focused on editorial independence and ownership influence, while media executives were asked about corporate strategies and economic pressures. Similarly, government officials and academics were queried on media policies and the broader socio-political implications of media ownership. This contextual adaptation ensured that the interview guide addressed the unique experiences of each stakeholder group while preserving comparability across responses. This approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research tool development (Kallio et al., 2016).

The IDI questions were structured around four primary themes derived from the literature review and theoretical framework: (1) editorial autonomy versus ownership influence, (2) political agenda setting, (3) market pressures and content prioritization, and (4) public trust and media credibility. These themes guided data collection and were refined through consultations with academic colleagues and pilot testing with two participants, which informed iterative revisions to the interview guide.

The use of the participants' native language (Bengali) in interviews enhances the authenticity and depth of the data collected. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via virtual platforms, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Each interview session was conducted in Bengali, the primary language of communication in Bangladesh, to facilitate natural and detailed responses. The duration of interviews varied but typically ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the complexity of the participant's role and their willingness to elaborate on specific issues.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the research, several strategies were employed, first data was collected from diverse sources (media executives, journalists, industry experts, government officials, and academics) to cross-verify information and reduce potential bias (Patton, 1999). Secondly, participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback, ensuring accurate representation of their perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study adopted a reflexive approach to balance *etic* (researcher-driven) and *emic* (participant-driven) perspectives. The researcher utilized the theoretical lens of political economy to guide the analysis (McChesney, 2008), while ensuring that participants' insights and lived experiences were authentically represented. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted during data collection and analysis to identify potential biases, challenge preconceptions, and validate emergent themes (Spall, 1998). This process minimized the influence of the researcher's assumptions and foregrounded participants' narratives, aligning with ethical qualitative research practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. This study adhered to ethical research

principles as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assured that their identities and responses would be protected and used solely for research purposes. This process ensured voluntary participation and protected participants' autonomy (Orb et al., 2001). Since the Bangladesh University of Professionals does not have an Institutional Review Board (IRB), no formal IRB approval was obtained. However, ethical compliance was ensured by following global standards for research ethics.

Among the interviewees, there were two media executives and six journalists from Prothom Alo, one of the leading newspapers in Bangladesh. Additionally, three industry experts were included, with affiliations to the broader media industry and a media research organization. The study also incorporated perspectives from two government officials, one representing the Ministry of Information and another from a regulatory authority. To provide academic insights, five university professors were interviewed, including three from the University of Dhaka, two associate professors from Jahangirnagar University, and one professor from the University of Rajshahi. This diverse group of participants ensured a comprehensive understanding of the topic, combining practical, regulatory, and academic perspectives.

Each participant provided valuable insights into their respective roles and perspectives within the media landscape, contributing to a nuanced analysis of the subject matter. A rigorous thematic analysis approach was employed, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme identification, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) final reporting. Themes were included based on their relevance to the research questions, saturation, and stakeholder diversity, while redundant and tangential data were excluded. This rigorous process ensured transparency and reliability in the analysis.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis chapter aimed to provide a structured overview of the key findings from the in-depth interviews conducted with various stakeholders at Prothom Alo. The analysis was organized around four central themes that emerged from the data, each reflecting critical aspects of the political economy of media ownership and influence in Bangladesh. To enhance clarity and coherence, this section offered an introductory framework before exploring the detailed themes, ensuring that each theme was supported by relevant narratives and quotes from participants.

Each theme presented in this analysis was thoroughly elucidated, drawing upon the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees to highlight the intricate dynamics at play. The pseudonym information of participants was incorporated to enrich the contextual understanding of the presented quotes, providing readers with a more nuanced view of the insights shared. By aligning the themes with

the research objectives, this section aimed to create a more evidential and coherent presentation of the findings.

Editorial Autonomy vs. Ownership Influence

To answer the first research question, the dynamics of editorial autonomy versus ownership influence at Prothom Alo, it is essential to delve into the perspectives shared by key stakeholders, particularly journalists who navigate these complexities daily. Participants in interviews consistently emphasized the delicate balance required to uphold journalistic integrity while managing the expectations and interests of media owners. This tension underscores the challenges inherent in maintaining editorial independence within a media landscape shaped by ownership pressures. One journalist remarked,

“We strive to uphold rigorous journalistic standards, but we also understand the financial realities and the need to align with the editorial stance favored by ownership.” This sentiment highlights the pragmatic approach taken by journalists at Prothom Alo, where they often find themselves negotiating between their professional ideals and the commercial imperatives imposed by ownership interests.”

Another interviewee echoed these sentiments, stating,

“There’s a constant push-pull between what we believe is in the public interest and what aligns with the strategic goals of the owners.” This acknowledgment illustrates the nuanced decision-making process within the editorial team, where considerations of public interest are weighed against the broader strategic objectives set by media ownership.”

The discourse on editorial autonomy versus ownership influence at Prothom Alo underscores broader concerns about media freedom in Bangladesh. Participants consistently raised issues related to the potential for self-censorship and the impact of ownership dynamics on journalistic practices. These discussions reflect a complex interplay where media organizations like Prothom Alo strive to maintain credibility and independence while operating within the constraints imposed by ownership structures.

The insights gleaned from interviews highlight the intricate balancing act journalists face at Prothom Alo. While they uphold rigorous journalistic standards, they must also navigate the influence of media ownership, reflecting a broader tension between editorial autonomy and commercial imperatives. These dynamics not only shape the editorial decisions within the organization but also contribute to the ongoing discourse on media freedom and integrity in Bangladesh.

Political Agenda Setting

To answer the second research question, the theme of Political Agenda Setting in the context of Prothom Alo’s influence, it is crucial to delve into how editorial decisions can reflect the political inclinations of media owners, thus shaping public discourse and policy debates. Participants in the study emphasized the profound impact of media

ownership on political narratives and public opinion formation, revealing underlying power dynamics within the media landscape. One interviewee remarked,

“The editorial stance of Prothom Alo often mirrors the interests of its owners. This alignment significantly influences which political issues receive prominence in public discussion.” This statement underscores the direct correlation between editorial decisions and the political leanings of media proprietors, illustrating how media outlets can amplify specific agendas.”

Another participant highlighted,

“When Prothom Alo takes a stance on a political issue, it sets the tone for broader public discourse. This can sway public opinion and even impact policy decisions.” This observation underscores the influential role of Prothom Alo in framing political debates and influencing societal perceptions through its editorial choices.”

Analysis of these perspectives reveals a complex interplay between media ownership, editorial autonomy, and political agenda setting. The alignment of editorial decisions with the interests of media owners reflects broader trends in media manipulation and influence, where economic and political motivations often intersect. This phenomenon underscores the need for critical examination of media practices and their implications for democratic processes and public discourse.

Prothom Alo’s role in shaping political agendas illustrates the intricate dynamics between media ownership, editorial autonomy, and societal influence. By influencing which issues gain prominence and how they are framed, media outlets like Prothom Alo play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy debates. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the broader implications of media influence on democratic processes and public discourse.

Market Pressures and Content Prioritization

To answer the third research question, the dynamics of market pressures and content prioritization at Prothom Alo, insights gleaned from interviews with key stakeholders provide invaluable perspectives. Participants highlighted the pervasive influence of advertising revenue, reader preferences, and the evolving landscape of digital media on editorial decisions. These factors underscored the complex interplay between commercial imperatives and journalistic integrity within Bangladesh’s media landscape. One interviewee emphasized how advertising revenue drives editorial decisions, stating,

“The need to balance financial stability with editorial integrity is a constant challenge. Advertisers often wield significant influence over content direction, especially in digital platforms where click-through rates and engagement metrics dictate priorities.”

Another interviewee echoed these sentiments, noting,

“Reader preferences increasingly guide our editorial focus. In a competitive digital age, audience engagement metrics drive content strategies, sometimes overshadowing traditional journalistic values.”

Analysis of these perspectives reveals a complex interplay. These quotes reflect the dual pressures faced by media organizations like Prothom Alo, where economic considerations and audience demands frequently intersect with editorial judgment. The analysis underscores how market dynamics shape content priorities, highlighting a nuanced balance between commercial viability and journalistic responsibilities. This exploration illuminates broader trends within the media industry, illustrating the intricate relationship between financial imperatives and editorial decision-making in Bangladesh.

Public Trust and Media Credibility

To answer the fourth research question, public trust and media credibility in the context of Prothom Alo, the interviews conducted underscored significant concerns and perceptions among participants. Many interviewees pointed to a noticeable erosion of trust in media institutions, with Prothom Alo specifically mentioned. They attributed this erosion to various factors, including perceived bias in reporting, sensationalism in news coverage, and the influence of corporate interests on editorial decisions. One interviewee lamented,

“I used to rely heavily on Prothom Alo for balanced news, but lately, it feels like every story is either overly sensationalized or skewed to favor certain agendas. It's disappointing because trust is crucial in journalism.”

Another participant echoed similar sentiments, stating,

“The credibility of Prothom Alo has taken a hit in recent years. I think they prioritize clicks and views over accuracy sometimes, which undermines their credibility as a reliable news source.”

These sentiments reflect broader concerns within the community about the role and responsibility of media organizations in shaping public opinion and fostering trust. The analysis of these interviews highlights the delicate balance media outlets like Prothom Alo must strike between attracting audiences in competitive media environments and upholding journalistic integrity.

The theme of public trust and media credibility emerges as a pivotal issue in understanding the challenges faced by Prothom Alo and similar media institutions. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach to journalism that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and adherence to ethical standards. As media landscapes continue to evolve, maintaining and rebuilding trust remains a paramount goal for ensuring the relevance and impact of journalistic endeavors like Prothom Alo in Bangladeshi society.

Discussion

The synthesis of literature highlights the significant impact of media ownership on journalistic practices and public discourse, exemplified notably in Prothom Alo's case. Owned by Mediastar Limited, a subsidiary of the Transcom Group, the newspaper's ownership underscores the convergence of media and corporate interests, potentially compromising editorial autonomy (Karim, 2017; Ali, 2019). This alignment with political economy theory suggests that media structures often mirror and perpetuate prevailing power dynamics (McChesney, 2008). Thematic analysis delves into the nuanced perspectives of Prothom Alo journalists, revealing a continuous negotiation between editorial independence and ownership influence. Journalists acknowledge the imperative to align content with ownership preferences while upholding journalistic standards (Haque, 2020), echoing broader concerns in Bangladesh about media freedom, where ownership dynamics may lead to self-censorship and limited diversity of viewpoints (Kabir, 2015).

The findings emphasize Prothom Alo's pivotal role in shaping public opinion and policy outcomes in Bangladesh by framing issues and setting agendas (McQuail, 2010). This influence extends notably into digital platforms, where the newspaper expands its reach despite challenges in media pluralism and democratization of information (Chowdhury, 2022). Media ownership significantly impacts editorial autonomy and news content (McChesney, 2008), evident in Prothom Alo's case where ownership by corporate giants like Transcom Group intertwines commercial goals with journalistic responsibilities (Karim, 2017; Ali, 2019). The study indicates that while Prothom Alo strives for journalistic integrity, economic pressures and ownership interests subtly influence editorial decisions, potentially affecting the breadth and depth of news coverage (Kabir, 2015).

Theoretical insights from political economy stress that media entities operate within socio-economic frameworks, reflecting and sometimes reinforcing existing power relations (McChesney, 2008). Prothom Alo's ownership by Mediastar Limited exemplifies this nexus between media and economic interests, influencing editorial policies and agenda-setting practices (Transcom Group, n.d.). Thematic analysis further illuminates these dynamics, demonstrating how Prothom Alo's editorial stance shapes public opinion and policy debates in Bangladesh, particularly through political agenda setting (Nabi, 2023). This influence extends to policymaking processes, illustrating the newspaper's role in framing issues and defining agendas within Bangladeshi society.

Participants note that Prothom Alo's editorial decisions often align with ownership interests, reflecting concerns about media manipulation and agenda setting (Hossain, 2021). This alignment underscores the intricate interplay between media ownership, editorial independence, and societal impact, where economic imperatives may occasionally overshadow journalistic autonomy (Hasan, 2019). The literature review identifies media ownership as pivotal in determining editorial autonomy and content diversity (Karim, 2017; Nabi, 2023). Prothom Alo's ownership structure, analyzed through the lens of Political Economy, highlights the

interdependence of media entities and economic interests (McChesney, 2008). Our findings affirm that while Prothom Alo aims for journalistic integrity, economic pressures such as advertising revenue and corporate ties exert significant influence over editorial decisions (Ahmed, 2020; Rahman, 2018).

Political economy theory emphasizes that media outlets like Prothom Alo play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy agendas (McChesney, 2008; McQuail, 2010). Our thematic analysis reveals how Prothom Alo's editorial stance influences public discourse on various issues from politics to social policies. Editorial decisions, influenced by market demands and ownership imperatives, contribute significantly to agenda-setting within Bangladesh's media landscape (Hasan, 2019). The digital transformation of media consumption introduces new challenges and opportunities for traditional newspapers like Prothom Alo (Chowdhury, 2022). Our findings underscore the impact of digital platforms on content prioritization and audience engagement strategies. The shift necessitates a reevaluation of editorial practices to balance commercial viability with journalistic responsibilities, reflecting global trends (Khan, 2023).

Comparative analysis with international studies enriches our understanding of media ownership dynamics. Studies emphasize challenges of media concentration and its implications for democracy (Picard, 2007). Situating Prothom Alo within this framework offers nuanced insights into how media ownership structures influence public trust and societal norms in Bangladesh. This study illuminates critical dimensions of media ownership's impact on journalistic practices in Bangladesh, particularly through Prothom Alo. Concerns over corporate influence on editorial independence and news diversity are underscored (Karim, 2017; Ahmed, 2020). Theoretical frameworks, like political economy, provide a robust foundation for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing media's role in reflecting and reinforcing power structures (McChesney, 2008).

The implications extend beyond theory to practical considerations for media professionals, policymakers, and scholars. The erosion of public trust in media institutions like Prothom Alo highlights the need for transparent and accountable journalism (Nabi, 2023). Concentrated ownership raises concerns about media pluralism and diverse representation in public discourse (Hossain, 2021). Our study calls for regulatory scrutiny to safeguard editorial independence and promote media diversity amidst evolving media landscapes.

Limitations

This study, while offering valuable insights into media ownership dynamics in Bangladesh, has several limitations. The focus on a single case study (Prothom Alo) may limit the generalizability of findings to other media outlets. The reliance on qualitative methods, while providing rich data, lacks the statistical robustness of quantitative approaches. Additionally, the sensitive nature of media ownership topics may have influenced

participants' responses, despite assurances of confidentiality.

Conclusion

In examining the intricate nexus between media ownership, economic imperatives, and editorial autonomy through the lens of Prothom Alo, several critical insights have emerged. This study has underscored the significant role played by media ownership in shaping public discourse and influencing societal perceptions in Bangladesh. Firstly, the ownership of Prothom Alo by the Transcom Group, a conglomerate with diversified business interests, highlights the intertwined nature of media and corporate agendas. This relationship poses inherent challenges to journalistic independence, as economic considerations may subtly influence editorial decisions, potentially compromising the breadth and diversity of news coverage. Secondly, the study reaffirms the relevance of political economy theory in understanding these dynamics. By analyzing Prothom Alo within this theoretical framework, we have elucidated how media entities operate not only as disseminators of information but also as actors within broader socio-economic contexts, reflecting and sometimes reinforcing existing power structures.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the dual role of media outlets like Prothom Alo, where they serve as both conduits of public information and as shapers of public opinion. The newspaper's influence extends beyond traditional print media to digital platforms, amplifying its reach but also intensifying challenges related to media pluralism and the democratization of information. Critically, this research underscores the need for robust regulatory frameworks to safeguard journalistic integrity and promote media diversity in Bangladesh. Such frameworks are essential to mitigate the risks associated with concentrated media ownership, ensuring that media outlets uphold their responsibility as impartial sources of information in a democratic society. The case study of Prothom Alo exemplifies broader global trends where media ownership influences editorial autonomy and public discourse. By shedding light on these complexities, this study contributes valuable insights to both scholarly debates and practical considerations concerning media governance and accountability.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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