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## Factors That Push Bangladeshi Media to Exercise Self-Censorship

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FACTORS THAT PUSH BANGLADESHI MEDIA TO EXERCISE SELF-CENSORSHIP

by

Abu Taib Ahmed

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts  
in Media Studies

at

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August 2020

## ABSTRACT

### FACTORS THAT PUSH BANGLADESHI MEDIA TO EXERCISE SELF-CENSORSHIP

by

Abu Taib Ahmed

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020  
Under the Supervision of Professor David S. Allen

Self-censorship is one of the biggest threats to press freedom. Press freedom, as well as freedom of the expression, is an indicator of a society's freedom and democracy. If the media cannot act freely, it can impact society's ability to function as a democracy. Journalists often face pressures from various power structures to engage in self-censorship. While journalistic self-censorship has been examined in a number of different countries, no studies of journalistic self-censorship in Bangladesh have been undertaken or no studies have been undertaken to see what factors influence journalists to exercise self-censorship or to figure out reasons that make journalists in Bangladesh filter media content. Bangladesh's unique history with journalism and expressive freedom makes Bangladesh an interesting site for the examination of journalistic self-censorship. Relying on an analysis of statements, writings and interviews of 38 journalists, the study revealed six factors that force journalists in Bangladesh to exercise self-censorship. The factors are: legal barriers, governmental interference, ownership, advertising, partisanship as unprofessional activity, and religion. This study found that the comments from journalists and media experts most frequently identify legal barriers, government interference, and partisanship as unprofessional activity as the greatest influences on self-censorship. Those institutional forces

punish journalists who violate legal standards or do not reinforce the beliefs of the government or political party. Journalists who do reinforce those beliefs are rewarded with access to information, governmental positions, opportunities to travel and other rewards not commonly available to all people in Bangladesh.

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To  
my father Abul Hossan & mother Rehena Begum,  
my beloved wife Syeda Tasfia Haque  
and especially my son Tahseen Ibn Taib

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## Chapter I Introduction

Self-censorship is one of the biggest threats to press freedom. Press freedom, as well as freedom of the expression, is an indicator of a society's freedom and democracy. If the media cannot act freely, it can impact society's ability to function as a democracy. Journalists often face pressures from various power structures to engage in self-censorship. In this thesis, I examine the role self-censorship plays in the creation of Bangladeshi journalistic content. As Bangladeshi media outlets do not have any legal or professional accountability mechanism (as it goes against the spirit of freedom of expression and press freedom), self-accountability becomes a key element in the production of journalistic content. And often, along with self-accountability comes self-censorship. And while self-accountability is often viewed as being a good for which to strive, self-censorship is often viewed as being something to be avoided—something that limits journalistic freedom. This thesis examines how self-censorship by Bangladeshi journalists can limit the expression of ideas. It also can be employed as a technique that allows journalists to continue to do their work.

Since its inception in 1971, Bangladesh has had a unique confrontational political system. Its society is sharply polarized over what should be the nationalistic identity of the country. The country's two major political camps – one led by Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the other by its arch-enemy Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – pursue politics based on two different nationalisms, Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism respectively, resulting in a never-ending political confrontation in Bangladesh. Political scientists opine the Bangladeshi society/polity has been polarized and divided almost vertically on the question of national

identity and political philosophy and that debate has resulted in sustained political instability and uncertainty in the country (Hossain, 2015). When Bangladesh's longstanding political crisis is rooted in the clash of nationalisms (Maniruzzman, 2016), it is not surprising that journalism reflects that polarization. Having a long career as a political reporter in Bangladesh, I have seen how much the media outlets are polarized on the question of politics. Most of them are either aligned with any of the two political camps or controlled by politically influential individuals (Home Office, UK, 2017, p. 9 & 20; Rahman, 2012, p.85). I have seen how news reports were slanted to suit the owner or political masters, why critical questions were not asked, and how sensitive yet urgent topics were avoided. I have also seen how individual reporters worked like political activists. This is reflected in the types of questions journalists address to policymakers and political leadership, but also in how political leadership favor certain reporters and certain media to give their delicate information.

Observing this interplay between journalists and political leadership is really the foundation of this thesis. I strive to better understand this relationship by examining how socio-political factors push Bangladeshi media and journalists to exercise self-censorship. Drawing on published writings, videos, and interviews with 38 journalists, this study is an attempt to better understand the interplays between journalists and the socio-political forces that help shape journalistic content.

The study found that six factors are incredibly important in the context of Bangladeshi journalism. Bangladeshi journalists and media experts said that the country's legal structure, influence from the government or the ruling power structure, influence stemming from media ownership, influence from advertisements, individual journalist's ideology or socio-political view and religion influence journalistic self-censorship. The most important factors, and the most

commonly discussed by journalists and media experts in the articles and interviews, were legal structures, governmental influence, and political partisanship of journalists as unprofessional activity. Although religion is rarely acknowledged by journalists, this study suggests that it might have a wider impact on the country's politics and thus on journalism as religion and religious affairs are deeply rooted in Bangladesh's politics and society. All of the six factors that push journalists and Bangladeshi media to self-censor are well-linked with the country's politics. It appears that journalism and politics are nothing but the two sides of the same coin. In other words, the country's politics play an instrumental role in shaping the media content in Bangladesh.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

This project consists of five chapters. The first chapter features a brief introduction into my interest in the topic followed by the chapter descriptions.

Chapter two includes a description of what is self-censorship. While there is a strong debate over the very concept and the definition of self-censorship among the scholars, there are arguments both in favor of self-censorship and against it. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes argue that self-censorship is a natural duty of a responsible citizen and an essential condition of civil peace while other philosophers and scholars believe that self-censorship violates the freedom of expression and norms of free speech. However, scholars categorize several types of self-censorship like public self-censorship, private self-censorship, private self-censorship by proxy, private self-censorship by self-restraint, true self-censorship and justified self-censorship. The chapter also talks about how self-censorship affects journalism. Scholars argue that journalistic self-censorship is a "subtle, hidden, and insidious" phenomenon (Lee, 1998, p. 57). To examine journalistic self-censorship, the chapter reviews Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy

of Influence Model, Bar-Tal's (2017) seven elements and aspects of self-censorship that characterize media self-censorship, and Daniel C Hallin's (1987) three concentric spheres of journalism's world of political discourse: 1) sphere of consensus, 2) sphere of legitimate controversy, and 3) sphere of deviance. This chapter concludes with the research questions that guide this project and the methodology that will be used to answer those questions.

Chapter three includes a description of the history of news media in Bangladesh, its legal and constitutional structure and its ownership pattern. The press has played a key role in the development of a national consciousness in Bangladesh, even from before its birth. Still, it has witnessed several waves of ups and downs with the authorities clamping down on the press from the inception of Bangladesh. Apart from inheriting some stringent laws from British colonial rule, the country has enacted and is still enacting harsh laws that curb press freedom, although the country's constitution guarantees freedom of expression. The chapter also discusses how media ownership is connected, if not directly controlled, with the confrontational politics. The chapter includes a description of how religion and nationalism interplays in Bangladeshi politics and thus in journalism. The chapter also sheds light on the journalistic associations and on what being a professional journalist means in Bangladesh.

Chapter four reveals the findings of the study, including description of the factors which push Bangladeshi media to exercise self-censorship. The country's legal structure, influence from the government or the ruling power structure, influence stemmed from the media ownership, influence from advertisements, individual journalist's ideology or socio-political view and religion are found to be the factors that push journalists and media practitioners to exercise self-censorship. Chapter five contains the conclusion which summarizes what the project found and its implications for our understanding of self-censorship in journalism. I also

discuss the project's limitations and future research.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review, Methodology and Research Questions**

In this chapter, I will highlight the literature that guides in my thesis, the research questions that will guide my study, and the methodology that I will use to answer those questions.

#### **Defining Self-censorship?**

The term self-censorship is self-interpretative. It's an act of self-restraint. Self-censorship denotes the act or action of refraining by oneself from expressing something (such as a thought, point of view, or belief) that others could deem objectionable. Self-censorship is the act of censoring or classifying one's own discourse. This is done out of fear of, or deference to, the sensibilities or preferences of others and without overt pressure from any specific people, group of people, party, social institution and/or any socio-political authority. Self-censorship is ubiquitous in every society. Friends self-censor when they deliberately avoid a topic that might hurt their friends; spouses self-censor when they do not express what they truly feel for the sake of domestic harmony; employees self-censor when they remain silent even after facing injustice because they do not want to incur the displeasure of their superiors; police officers or investigators or journalists self-censor when they withhold information that may jeopardize an ongoing inquiry; a newspaper self-censors when it does not publish news that conflicts with the ideology that it espouses. Even the populace of a certain nation or ethnic groups exercises self-censorship while talking about the past misdeeds carried out by their ancestors. For instances, Dutch people and Dutch institutions exercise self-censorship while speaking about the liberation of Dutch East Indies and such self-censorship is exercised by French, Russians, Britons,

Belgians, Argentineans, Peruvians, Americans, and the people of other nations with a view to concealing immoral acts committed by the ancestors (Bar-Tal, 2017).

Self-censorship has all along been a part and parcel of human communications. It was exercised and is now exercised in every social sphere from antiquity to date, having no temporal and spatial boundaries (Baltussen and Davis, 2015). The ubiquity of self-censorship proves that it is an integral socio-cultural phenomenon. Philosophers and scholars have long debated the pros and cons of the phenomenon in human communications. Jonathan Parkin (2015) argues that political philosopher Thomas Hobbes concealed his own political, religious, and scientific views for the sake of self-preservation and made self-censorship a centerpiece of his political theory.

Humans need to exercise self-censorship at times to not hurt others, or to uphold the freedom of others. Scholars have argued that people exercise self-censorship either to avoid “external negative sanctions” or to gain something positive (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 9). Some argue, it is human instinct for people to try to conceal their wrongdoings and that is reflected in society and social institutions like the state, political parties and religious organizations as their characters are eventually shaped by the characters of the individuals (Bar-Tal, 2017). Hobbes argues that self-censorship is a natural duty of a responsible citizen and an essential condition of civil peace as, Hobbes thinks, the political problem is “the unrestrained expression of the beliefs and opinions of autonomous selves pursuing their own goods; the inevitable clash between them results in a state of war” (Parkin, 2015, p. 300). But there is a group of philosophers and scholars who believe that self-censorship violates the freedom of expression or free speech which is widely held to be one of the central values of societies as it has taken the center stage in the Universal Human Rights Declaration (United Nations, 2020).

The conflict here is between freedom and responsibility. Cultural and social conventions which are often referred to as “civility” impose limits on us as to what we should do and what not to do. Civility is an associational pressure (Ramsboomair, 2019). Ramsboomair argues that civility also has the potential to degrade the quality of discourse, leaving “us too deferential to majority opinion” (2019, p. 572). Chamlee-Wright (2019) argues that self-censorship fosters both positive and negative outcomes. Peter Wood (2019) argues that humans are moved to bury their ideas for many reasons. “Cowardice and conformity-for-conformity’s-sake” to avoid hassle, he suspects, is responsible for most self-censorship. He, however, holds that “governing one’s tongue” or self-censorship is a good idea. Governing your tongue, he thinks, means wisely choosing when to speak (Wood, 2019, p. 604).

John Horton says self-censorship “can, for good reasons, give rise to some normative ambivalence and that its ethical status is less straightforward than is that of ordinary cases of censorship” (Horton, 2011, p. 92). He argues that self-censorship has its specific features that make it problematic and holds that self-censorship should be “morally objectionable” like the “other forms of censorship” (Horton, 2011, p. 102).

Given the myriad factors that characterize self-censorship, the types of self-censorship can in a nutshell be distinguished based on a question as to whose will is dominant. Is the agent who is self-censoring genuinely the author of the act or a mere performer or only playing a role of instrument? Horton (2011) argues that the agents/persons/institutions/ who will have an “element of reluctance, and a feeling of resentment” while censoring should not be called the self-censors thanks to their unwillingness to censor (p. 100). Horton contends that the self-censorship caused of others’ action can be thought of as justified self-censorship (Horton, 2011,



p. 102). According to Horton, those who censor themselves “on their own volition and being uncoerced by others” are the true self-censors (Horton, 2011, p. 99, 100).

Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann (2013) argue that the complex phenomena of self-censorship cannot be suitably understood without identifying two types of the phenomenon. One is public self-censorship and the other is private self-censorship. Public self-censorship is exercised in response to an externally existing censor or public censor. Private self-censorship is exercised in the absence of an external censor, *i.e.* without any coercion. They defined these two types of self-censorship in relations with the principle of free speech of the censee (the person who censors). In turn, they recognize two types of private self-censorship: self-censorship by proxy and self-censorship by self-restraint. Private self-censorship which is exercised through an individual's “internalization of some external set of values,” such as “the norms of an association,” is called Private Self-censorship by Proxy. The second type of private self-censorship, exercised in response to an individual's suppression of his or her own attitudes even in the absence of an explicitly external or public influence, they term private self-censorship by self-restraint. They say this happens when an individual adopts a personal set of values that constrain the expression of their attitudes like “a person may develop a personal code where it is deemed impermissible to express obscene language or to speak about money in public company” (Cook and Heilmann, 2013, p. 187). They argue that private self-censorship by self-constraint can be defended as the most ethically justifiable because individuals are acting on their own accord absent coercion (2013, p. 191).

Bar-Tal (2017) defines the self-censorship of information as an act of “intentionally” and “voluntary” withholding information which would have a wide impact in society in the absence

of “formal obstacles” like official censorship. He argues that such self-censorship often obstructs the “functioning of a democratic society” (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 4).

While outlining a conceptual framework of self-censorship, Bar-Tal (2017) elaborates seven elements or aspects of self-censorship which helps define the dynamics that characterize media self-censorship. They are: 1) information versus opinion, 2) limitations of self-censorship, 3) content of the withheld information, 4) types of self-censorship, 5) types of self-censors, 6) experiencing dilemma, and 7) self-censorship and the society. Bar-Tal finds nothing wrong with self-censoring opinion, but the self-censorship of information raises questions (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 6). Second, he differentiates between “formally enforced self-censorship” and “socially enforced self-censorship” and holds that the former is not self-censorship, but rather censorship (Bar-Tal 2017, p. 6). Third, Bar-Tal argues that the “content of the withheld information” influences the dynamics (characteristics) of self-censorship. The characteristics of the phenomenon vary depending on what type of impacts the content would put on people (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 7). Fourth, the types of the self-censorship needs to be assessed (*i.e.*, self-censoring by gatekeepers, by the citizens and/or first-hand information or second-hand information) (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 7). In the category of types of self-censors, Bar-Tal shows how a wide range of people and institutions exercise self-censorship for various reasons that ranges from hiding wrongdoings, crimes, guilt, as well as hiding crimes like rape and abuse by its victims. He argues that bystanders also self-censor to avoid hassles. Bar-Tal points out that people exposed to various documents and/or evidence often self-censor fearing that revealing that information might be harmful to the people or a group of people or individual/s or for society (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 8). Sixth, Bar-Tal identifies an individual’s dilemma to self-censor, pointing out that the level of the dilemma varies from person to person and depends on the type of information, context, and other

factors. He argues that if there is no dilemma about revealing the information in a situation when the person does not consider the information worthy to reveal, then that should not be called self-censorship (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 8). And finally, Bar-Tal argues that the dynamics of self-censorship varies depending on the relationship between the self-censor and society. Bar-Tal points out four motivating factors and four contributing factors to self-censorship. First a motivating factor is the human desire to not harm the image of the ingroup, a second factor is to avoid “negative sanctions” and gain positive sanctions, a third motivation is “intrinsic” (Bar-Tal points out that people self-censor to maintain their “own positive self-view”), and a fourth factor is the desire to uphold one’s own ideology and belief. The four contributing factors are: the context of the group, individual factors (characteristics of the person who has the information), the content types and circumstantial factors (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 9-10).

From the above discussion, it is clear that self-censorship exercised by gatekeepers has the potential to have a broader impact on society than self-censorship by individuals. John Horton is of the opinion that the censoring agent – the individual or the institution – who is exercising the practice (self-censor) should, in some sense, be “the author of the act” (self-censoring), rather than the mere performer/instrument (the agent) in response to impending threats (Horton, 2011, p. 98).

### **Self-censorship and Journalistic Work**

Drawing on these two criteria, media outlets and journalists are agents of self-censorship whose acts of self-censorship impact all of society. There has been a long debate over the issue of self-censorship in the media. The everyday work of journalism involves many difficult ethical decisions. Journalists need to make a choice in every stage of journalism like choosing headlines,

words, angles, pictures, and video/audio clips. The founder of the Ethical Journalism Network and former General Secretary of International Federation of Journalists, Aidan White, calls it self-regulation, not self-censorship (White, 2014). He maintains that self-regulation in media “remains at the heart of producing credible, trustworthy and timely journalism” (White, 2014). Terming “telling everything they know to a public whose right to know is sacred” is the media industry’s fundamental mission, political cartoonist and author Ted Rall (2019), however, holds that “well-intentioned, self-imposed ethical guidelines” also get in the way of this fundamental mission (Rall, 2019).

A survey of nearly 300 journalists and news executives in the United States in 2000 by the Pew Research Center and the *Columbia Journalism Review* reveals that self-censorship is a common phenomenon in the news media (Pew Research, 2000). One-fourth of the local and national newsmen say they “purposely avoided newsworthy stories”, while nearly same percentage of newsmen acknowledge that they soften the “tone of stories to benefit the interests of their news organizations” (Pew Research, 2000). According to the survey, some 41 percent of journalists say they exercise either or both of the two practices (Pew Research, 2000).

A survey of about 1,000 European journalists by the Council of Europe reveals that because of intimidation and threats, over 30 percent of the journalists said they tone down “sensitive or critical stories” and another 15 per cent said they abandon these type of stories altogether (Council of Europe, n.d.). One-fifth of surveyed journalists said they shape their news articles in a way that suits their organizations’ interests (Council of Europe). Referring to a report from the Ethical Journalism Network, White (2014) says Turkey’s major media outlets censor news to maintain “friendly political and business relations with the state”. White further says that

journalists in many parts of the world, including in Russia, China, Iran, Egypt, North Korea, Mexico, Pakistan and the Philippines routinely censor themselves to avoid physical, violence persecution and assassination (White, 2014).

Terming journalistic self-censorship a “subtle, hidden, and insidious” phenomenon, Chin-Chuan Lee (1998) holds that paradoxes have shaped “inconsistent and uneven patterns” of self-censorship in the media (Lee, 1998, p. 57). He observes that self-censorship can be embedded in the everyday media practices in such a manner that journalists would not even know that they are self-censoring. He fears that the “spiral of silence process” may set in if a certain “climate of opinion pervades in the news environment” (Lee, 1998, p. 57).

Drawing on a study of Hong Kong media, Lee (1998) points out how self-censorship is used in the exercise of power: dodging political controversy, hiring of pro-government or pro-party or pro-ideology people to assume responsible posts, shifting of editorial tone in line with the change of governments, redesign of space to reduce a newspaper’s political overtone, firing of high-risk contributors, dissemination of writing guidelines on “sensitive stories”, and the placement of sensitive stories in obscure positions (Lee, 1998, p. 57). He argues that the censoring agents use tactics like “institutional absorption and friendship through honor,” respect, gifts, and banquets and withholding of honor, benefits, and information in order to push journalists to exercise self-censorship (Lee, 1998, p. 58). Journalists, on the other hand, self-censor to obtain scoops and interviews from the respective power structure (Lee, 1998, p. 58). Lee also found that journalists belonging to the same ideological group are less likely to fear criticizing the party or parties of that ideology (cite needed here).

Francis L.F. Lee and Joseph Chan (2009) contend that much of press self-censorship is exercised without the managers of the news organizations “explicitly ordering it” and without the frontline journalists knowingly doing it. But they maintain that staff and frontline journalists toe the line of the newspaper/media outlets (and its editorial policy) even if superiors do not always directly command them as to how to work on a story (Lee and Chan, 2009, p. 114).

Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (2013) argue that the media content is essentially a social construction, given the multitude of factors that sway the media content. They are of the opinion that journalists view and interpret the world in terms of their own image of reality, their own beliefs, values and norms. They hold that the media content is influenced by “media workers’ socialization and attitudes”, “media organizations and routines”, “other social institutions and forces” and also observe that the media content is a “function of ideological positions” and often “maintains the status quo” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013, p. 8). Given the multitude of factors that influence the media content, they have developed a theoretical framework called the “Hierarchy of Influence Model” in which they argue that the media portray a view that is influenced by multitude of factors on at least “five levels of influence” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013, p. 8). The five levels that influence media content are: social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013, p. 9). The “hierarchy of influences” model explains how the multiple socio-political forces and newswriters’ individual factors play a role in the making of news and how they interact in the process. While Shoemaker and Reese don’t deal directly with self-censorship, their five levels of influence help us understand how influences on journalists come from many different places of the society and why and how journalists go for exercising self-censorship.

## The Influence of Social Systems

Shoemaker and Reese (2013) contend that the social system is the foundation from which all media content is constructed although it does not determine the exact nature of the content (p. 93). Reese and Shoemaker (2013) argue that four intertwined social “subsystems” – ideology, economy, politics and culture, which are intertwined in many ways – sway media content (p. 69). They also argue that a “national system” is the essential focus of the news (p. 64). They also hold that the “news paradigm structures stories so that events are interpreted from the perspective of powerful interests” (p. 65).

Agreeing with the notion of the British Marxist school of media studies that the dominant ideology of the society is linked to the norms and practices of “journalists’ occupational ideology” (82), Reese and Shoemaker (2013) contend that “whether ideological influences on the mass media are judged to be good or bad, positive or negative, functional or dysfunctional, depends largely on point of view” (p. 71). Subscribing to the idea of Siebert *et al* that the “press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates,” Reese and Shoemaker argue political systems influence media (p. 72-73). They hold that the “process of communication is central in the development and evolution of culture, as the media help constitute how people think of themselves and how they construct values and norms” (p. 73). Reese and Shoemaker point out that media “accept the boundaries, values, and ideological rules of the game established and interpreted by elite sources” while accepting “valueless reporting” as the norm (p. 84).

Media scholars are of the opinion that politicians give reporters access to delicate information only to create their own narratives through the media. Political communication strategist Frank Luntz believes that “it’s not what you say, it’s what people hear” and that’s he

made it the slogan of his PR firm (Bennett, 2012, p. 111). Referring to Luntz's argument that: "a compelling story, even if factually inaccurate, can be more emotionally compelling than a dry recitation of the truth" (Bennett, 2012, p. 114), political scientist W. Lance Bennett says news is the "strategically constructed versions of events" as it "often translates the political world into personal terms based on the existing emotions and values of audiences" (p. 118).

### **The Influence of Social Institutions**

Agreeing with Castells' idea of the media as a "generalized institutionalized space" (p. 95), Shoemaker and Reese (2013) argue that this space maintains a fluid, complex and multi-layered relationship with other social institutions (p. 96) as it has a relation to "the welfare of society or to the success of democratic government" (p.107). Social institutions and other forces such as sources, interests groups, media watchdogs, rival media houses, advertisers and audiences, public relations groups working on behalf of various social organizations, state machinery and media market exert extensive influence on the media content (p. 123-128).

Introducing a theory of media objectivity, journalism historian Daniel C Hallin divides (1987) journalism's world of political discourse into three concentric spheres: 1) sphere of consensus, 2) sphere of legitimate controversy, and 3) sphere of deviance. Based on the sphere, journalists decide what they should cover and how, *i.e.* journalists self censor based on which sphere information falls in. According to Hallin's model, journalists feel no pressure to be objective in publishing what falls in the sphere of consensus. In other words, journalists can publish whatever falls in the sphere of consensus, without any reservation, as "those social objects are not regarded by the journalists and most of the society as controversial" (p. 116). Rather, journalists play a role of "an advocate or celebrant of consensus values" (p. 117). But the question of "objectivity" and "balance" comes whenever an issue falls in the "sphere of



legitimate controversy” where “objectivity and balance” stand out to be the “supreme journalistic virtues” (p. 116) and the definition of objective journalism varies (p. 117). The sphere of deviance is the realm of the political actors and views which “journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard” (p. 117) and that’s why journalists don’t publish report on what falls in the sphere of deviance. Hallin contends that “each sphere has internal gradations, and the boundaries between them are often fuzzy” (p. 117). The sphere plays “the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable political conflict” (117). Hallin opines that when “political issues were broached, personalization transformed their meaning in a way that shifted them out of the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy and into the Sphere of Consensus” (p. 136).

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002) introduced a model called the “Propaganda Model” in which they show that the published or printed news content is nothing but the residue of the “raw materials of news” and the raw materials must pass through five social filters to “make the raw materials fit to publish” (p. 1). The first filter is “the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms”. This is the most powerful filter which affects news choices (p. 14) when the media news people are so overwhelmed by the elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that they become convinced that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p.2). Secondly, the raw materials of the news are filtered by the news managers, keeping in view the “revenue from the advertisers”. Thirdly, the raw materials of the news are filtered by the “sources” as the “mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic

necessity and reciprocity of interest” (p. 18). The fourth filter is “flak”. The media content is filtered to avoid flak from the audience and powerful quarters. If flak is “produced on a large scale, or by individuals or groups with substantial resources, it can be both uncomfortable and costly to the media” (p. 26). The fifth filter is “ideological filter” in which media news people consider anti-communism a religion as Herman and Chomsky argue that the “ideology and religion of anticommunism is a potent filter” (p. 31).

Sociologist Todd Gitlin (1980) points out some “causes of story selection” in institutions or social conditions which exist outside the news organization. He argues that “technological factors, national culture, economics, the audience, powerful news sources, and the ideologies of the dominant social powers” sway journalists as to what stories should be selected (p. 250-251). Gitlin contends that the ideals of journalists are “fluid enough to protect them from seeing that their autonomy is bounded” and argues that journalists “systematically frame the news to be compatible with the main institutional arrangements of the society” (p. 269). Gitlin thinks that journalists’ sense of professionalism varies depending on things like “personal life-experience, specific organizational arrangements, and the shifting boundaries of the ideologically permissible in the wider society as well as within the newsroom” (p. 269). Gitlin points out that the values of journalists are “anchored in routines that are at once steady enough to sustain hegemonic principles and flexible enough to absorb many new facts; and these routines are bounded by perceptions of the audience's common sense and are finally accountable to the world views of top managers and owners. These factors shape the news; even centralized manipulations by the state have to respect these limits” (p. 272-273).

Arguing that politics is primarily media politics, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2013) argues that the media constitute “the space where power relationships are decided

between competing political and social actors” (p. 194) and this reality affects the content of the news on a daily basis as it (affecting media content in line with the particular political goal) is “one of the most important endeavors of political strategists” (p. 197-198). Castells argues that “while politicians feed the media, the media often feast on raw politics, either to cook it for the audience or to let it rot, so that the feeders become exposed, thus attracting the interest of the public in both cases” (p. 227-228).

### **The Influence of Media Organizations**

Shoemaker and Reese (2013) argue that media outlets function following a certain “organizational and bureaucratic setting” having connected with ownership, roles, structure, profitability, platform, target audience, influence from advertisers, and market competition and the very nature of the structure of the media outlets – as an organization -- make it to “have an important impact on content” (p. 135). According to Shoemaker and Reese, organizational influences from media outlets can “distort journalists’ ability to objectively describe the world” and independent journalistic practice may evolve in pursuance of the corporate goals of the media outlets, leading to an impact on content (p. 157). As Shoemaker and Reese write, “By establishing corporate policies in line with their own interests, owners can have an unmistakable impact on media content” (p. 163).

Robert W. McChesney (1999) contends that the notion of professional journalism makes the media organizations as the agents of “public service”. Pursuing professional journalism means disconnecting “the editorial process from the explicit supervision of the owners and advertisers of the mass media” (McChesney. 1999, p. 17). But “hypercommercialism” (p. 33), – the excessive influence of advertising in the media to obtain success and profit – has brought about a qualitative change in the “public service” role of the media organizations (McChesney,

1999, p. 48). In professional journalism, the media content is not biased “by the dictates of owners and advertisers, or by the biases of the editors and reporters,” it should rather be shaped by the “core public service values” (McChesney, 1999, p. 49). But in the wake of “ever-greater corporate concentration, media conglomeration, and hypercommercialism”, McChesney holds that the “notion of public service – that there should be some motive for media other than profit – is in rapid retreat if not total collapse” in the US media (P. 76-77).

Terje S. Skjerdal (2010) shows that self-censorship practice is widespread among the journalists of the Ethiopian state media. And the Ethiopian journalists think that the practice is justified because primarily of four reasons. The reasons are: “(1) relegation of ethical responsibility; (2) elasticity of journalistic editing; (3) confidence in critical audiences; and (4) adherence to social responsibility” (Skjerdal, 2010, p. 116). Various studies show that self-censorship is encouraged in Asia in such a manner that it has turned out to be a “journalistic practice” (p. 236). Journalists in Asia are advised by their seniors that self-censorship is a “responsible” function in order to “build and develop the nation” (Tapsell, 2012, p. 228). Tapsell found that 71 per cent of journalists in Indonesia claimed that “decisions relating to content might be changed because of the owner’s influence, even if the owner seldom attended editorial meetings” (p. 236). In the process of exercising self-censorship, the media content (in Indonesia) is “slanted to suit the owner, critical questions are not asked, and sensitive topics are avoided” (Tapsell, 2012, p. 242). Jingrong Tong (2009) shows how the self-censorship practice has turned out to be an “efficient way for newspaper organizations to deal with the clash between their interests and those of the interests of journalists and the public” in China (p. 609). With greater concerns over political safety, the self-censorship in Chinese newsrooms maximizes “the

possibility of getting reports published at the same time as minimizing political risks” (p. 609), although self-censorship is rare at the individual journalist level, *i.e.* frontline reporters in China (p. 608).

### **The Influence of Routine Practices**

While doing journalism, journalists exercise a set of routine practices. The routine practices, which are intertwined with other levels of the hierarchy model of influence, play a big role in mediating media content. Shedding light on the practices journalists and news managers go through every day, Shoemaker and Reese (2013) point out that journalists follow a certain routine while processing the raw materials of news until it is published or aired and in so doing, the process “inevitably distorts the original event” (p. 182). Routines of news work that journalists follow include maintaining sources (routine and expert sources), fact-checking, maintaining “objectivity”, audience demand, presentation format, space in the medium, narrative story structure, news framing, and maintaining deadlines. Shoemaker and Reese argue that these routines provide levers to both the journalists and the power structures outside the media organizations to influence the content. They argue that “media routines stem from three domains: audiences, organizations, and suppliers of content defensive routines prevent journalists from offending the audience and their sources” (p. 173). They argue that routine practices yield “acceptable news stories by directing news workers to take facts and events out of one context and reconstitute them into the appropriate format. Shoemaker and Reese think that journalists’ routine practices provide the “power centers on the outside”, like sources, expert sources, advertisers, audiences, public relation firms, with a scope to influence media content (p. 203). Dwelling on the influences exerted by expert sources’, Shoemaker and Reese point out that

journalists' choice of experts has an "important influence on how that meaning is shaped" (p. 189).

Herbert J. Gans (2003) equates news organizations with factories and points out that routinization is equally important for the media outlets because they need to "distribute their product more regularly and punctually" like other products, as news is a perishable item (p. 50). In so doing, journalists are heavily dependent on their sources to get the raw materials of news as they are to produce the product (media content) every day like a factory, without any hiatus. Gans considers the source-journalist relationship to be "symbiotic" and argues that the journalists, because of their need for a regular supply of information, cannot "alienate" their sources (p. 50). Gans thinks that journalists, knowingly or unknowingly, help "legitimate and even glorify the sources and strata from which they report" (p. 47). In this process, sources have the first say in the report (p. 46) and the reporters turn into messengers of the people in power structure, including political, governmental, and other leaders (p. 49). In so doing, Gans thinks that reporters' news stories include "myths, stereotypes, and biases that are prevalent in their social circles and in the country's newsrooms" (p. 57).

Mark Fishman (1988) shows how the routine methods of gathering news influence the media content or determine the ideological character of the product. In the beat system, a routinized practice of journalists, Fishman argues, reporters are "exposed to a bureaucratic setting" and that bureaucratic consciousness is "invaluable for detecting news because it indicates where the reporters should position themselves to discover happenings not yet known" (p. 51). So, Fishman argues the essence of what reporters collect through "bureaucratically packaged activities" is a production which is produced "within the agencies they cover" (p. 52), suggesting that the reporters' collections of facts/information is a social construction as opposed

to just facts.

Pointing out that in news, facts must be “quickly identified” (p. 82), sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1978) argues that verification of facts is “both a political and a professional accomplishment” (p. 83). Tuchman holds that the bureaucratic nature of newswriters’ routine allows the reporters to present the fact or the information with an “interpretive analysis” (p. 97). In the process of doing reporting, Tuchman argues that reporters are “engaged in the theoretic activity of making sense of the world by constructing meanings” (p. 87). According to Tuchman, reporters amass a host of “supposed facts” while checking the facts in the news and together they form “a web of facticity by establishing themselves as cross-referents to one another” (p. 86). Tuchman contends that the different approaches which are accepted as “professional tools and extensions of news typifications”, to set story forms lead “the reporters to the wrong conclusions.” And the “web of facticity” guides the reporters’ process of searching information or news and then puts the produced news or content in a certain frame (p. 103), suggesting that the facts presented in the content do not remain authentic, rather they go through some sort of distortion. Tuchman also makes the argument the objectivity and/or professionalism is a part of routine. The way the doctors tell the patients the “probable success of different medical options”, the “professional reporters” guide the news consumers to decide what is the truth, by adding the alternative truth-claims from all sides—a necessary practice of objectivity in the name of maintaining objectivity and “professionalism (p. 90-91).

Warren Breed (1955) argues that every newspaper has “a policy, admitted or not”, (p. 327), suggesting that every newspaper has its own preferred view of society and life and they often like to promote that policy by means of “slanting” the published news in the name of pursuing “professional norms”. According to Breed, "professional norms" are of two types. One

is “technical norms” which “deal with the operations of efficient news gathering, writing, and editing” and the second one is “ethical norms” which “embrace the newsman's obligation to his readers and to his craft and include such ideals as responsibility, impartiality, accuracy, fair play, and objectivity” (p. 327). Breed, however, does not think that slanting means prevarication. Rather, Breed points out, slanting “involves omission, differential selection and preferential placement, such as "featuring" a pro-policy item, "burying" an anti-policy story in an inside page” (p. 327).

### **The Influence of Individuals**

In Shoemaker and Reese’s Hierarchy of Influence model, the individual level is the level where the media content gets final shape after passing through all of the levels of influence as individuals both “shape and are shaped by their larger institutional settings” (p. 209) and individual beliefs are “core to the concentric rings” (p. 244). Shoemaker and Reese argue that none of us can “escape having our actions affected by our personal subjectivities and life experiences” (p. 238). Pointing out that personal and professional factors are closely related, Shoemaker and Reese hold that both help “determine content, particularly to the extent that communicators have the power necessary to imprint their own decisions on the product” (p. 238). Shoemaker and Reese also argue that partisan beliefs affect news decisions and such influence is the “strongest in those countries with a tradition of partisan advocacy” (p. 227).

Journalism is an activism which takes place in a given society or in a given social condition, not in isolation in a utopia. So, it is normal that the journalism would be affected or influenced by the various social dynamics. Drawing on above discussion, we can see various socio-political factors, social system or ideologies, cultures and ethos of a particular society, the philosophy and behaviors of the social institutions, the moto and size of the media organizations,



the complex nature of journalistic practices itself, and newswriters' (communicators/mediators) individual characteristics and ideology put considerable influence on the news content. Although all of the five levels of analysis have their own factors that put influence individually on the news content, the factors from the most micro individual level to the most macro social system are intertwined in many ways, reinforcing or undercutting the influence of each other.

### **Research Questions**

While journalistic self-censorship has been examined in a number of different countries, no studies of journalistic self-censorship in Bangladesh have been undertaken or no studies have been undertaken to see what factors influence journalists to exercise self-censorship or to figure out reasons that make journalists in Bangladesh filter media content. Bangladesh's unique history with journalism and expressive freedom (examined in the next chapter) makes Bangladesh an interesting site for the examination of journalistic self-censorship. Self-censorship, rather than being a forbidden practice, becomes a technique that journalists use to enable them to continue to do their work.

This thesis will attempt to better understand journalistic self-censorship in Bangladesh guided by the following research question: What factors do journalists see as the most important influence on self-censorship in Bangladesh?

### **Methodology**

Information to answer these questions was drawn from an extensive review of the articles by or interviews with Bangladeshi journalists and media experts. While in-depth interviews with journalists would be a good way to answer these questions, it is difficult to get journalists to answer these questions and to assure them that their identities and what they tell the researcher will be protected. Some Bangladeshi journalists have written about their experiences with self-

ensorship and some have given interviews (videos of these interviews are available on YouTube). That list appears at the end of this thesis in the Reference section (see “Sources of Journalistic Writings, Publications and Interviews”). To answer the research questions, I’ve analyzed those articles and interviews, to better understand the factors and forces within Bangladesh that influence journalistic self-censorship, how journalists respond to these pressures, and how they use self-censorship to do their work. I also did a textual analysis of the various newspaper articles and reports of various watchdog organizations to understand the dynamics that influence the media content in Bangladesh.

To get the views of Bangladeshi journalists and media experts about the state of self-censorship in the country, I did textual analysis of 61 published articles and video clips which include interviews, opinion pieces and hard-news stories; and gone through some of the discussions on the Bangladeshi media available on YouTube. These were obtained through a Google search using key terms such as: “Self-censorship in Bangladeshi media”, “self-censorship and Bangladeshi media”, “Press freedom in Bangladesh”. I also used Bengali-language key terms like: “সেলফ সেন্সরশিপ” (self-censorship), “মিডিয়া সেলফ সেন্সরশিপ” (Media self-censorship), and “গণমাধ্যমের স্বাধীনতা” (press freedom). The materials analyzed cover the period from 2010 to 2020. Initial searches yielded 80 newspaper articles and video clips, but 19 of them were eliminated because they did not touch directly on self-censorship or press freedom.

The analysis yielded views on self-censorship and press freedom from 38 journalists, editors and media experts on the state of Bangladeshi media (see Appendix: List of Journalists, Editors, and Media Experts).

### Chapter III History of News Media in Bangladesh

Bengali journalism began in 1818 with the publication of three Bangla newspapers: *Bengal Gazette*, *Digdarshan* and *Samachar Darpan* in undivided India. Formal journalism was introduced by James Augustus Hicky by publishing a weekly journal named *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* in Calcutta in January 1780 (Banglapedia, 2003). The British colonial administration had begun its rule in the subcontinent (now India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) in 1757 which ended in 1947. On August 14, 1947, Pakistan (comprising East Pakistan and West Pakistan) came into being, and in 1971 East Pakistan achieved its liberation and became the sovereign nation, Bangladesh. The first weekly from Dhaka, *The Dacca News*, was published in 1856. The *Dhaka Prakash* was first published in 1861 and the *Dhaka Darpan* in 1863 (Banglapedia, 2003).

The press has played a key role in the development of a national consciousness in Bangladesh. For the middle class elite, the media was a critical medium for mobilizing nationalist public opinion, especially before and during the war of independence. Radio in 1971 became inextricably linked to the nationalist movement and its aspirations. Subsequently, during the war, from April 1971 to December 1971, the rebel radio station was the most widely heard voice of the government (Chowdhury, 2003). The period around the birth of Bangladesh witnessed the publication of many newspapers and magazines that includes *Banglar Bani* (1971), *Ganakantha Samaj* (1972), *Janapada* (1973), and *Bangabarta* (1973). After Bangladesh was liberated, *The Pakistan Observer* was renamed as *The Bangladesh Observer*.

Immediately after independence, the newspapers suffered a major blow when most of them came under fire under the Special Power Act, 1974 as some sections of the act essentially

curbed the press freedom, on a plea of “prohibition of prejudicial acts” (Ahmed, p.18). In 1975, the government took over ownership and management of four daily newspapers and the rest of the seven dailies were banned promulgating the Newspapers (Annulment of Declaration) Ordinance (Ahmed, p. 25). HM Ershad, who came to power on March 24, 1982, and appointed himself chief martial law administrator, suspended freedom of expression and banned 693 newspapers before his rule finally ended in 1991 (Gonzalez-Foerster, 1994, p. 65). From 1975 to 1980, when Bangladesh experienced many military takeovers, the prime targets of rebellious soldiers were the newspapers, radio and TV stations (Ahmed, 2006, p. 10).

In the wake of the fall of autocratic rule in 1990, an agreement was reached in a joint declaration of the political alliances, highlighting the process of democratic transition, including ensuring freedom of press (Ahmed, 2006, p. 10). The interim government, which assumed power after the fall of the Ershad regime in 1991, brought some amendments to the Special Powers Act and Printing Presses and Publications Act which relaxed some of the boundaries on the press (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). Since then, privately owned TV and radio channels were allowed and dozens of news and entertainment-based TV and radio outlets were opened. After economic reforms, particularly adoption of free market economic policies in the early 2000s, the number of media in Bangladesh increased significantly. Khadimul Islam and Mohammad Yousuf (2017) found the media system of Bangladesh to be “neither libertarian nor authoritarian, but somewhere in the middle” (p. 6). However, they contend that the Bangladeshi media is “slowly moving in the direction of libertarianism” with the number of private television channels increasing (p. 6). The country has a total of 1,244 print media outlets, 477 of them are registered, 826 of them are daily newspapers and 273 are weeklies. It has 44 TV channels, but 26 of them are active and three of them are state-owned. The number of state-owned radio centers is 22 and

the number of state-owned FM transmitters is 32. The number of privately owned FM radio is 28 and number of community radio is 32 (Rahman, 2016, p. 326).

### **Use of Power to Issue and Revoke Licenses**

Politicians benefit by regulating the entry of firms into particular industries (Djankov, et al., 2006). In the media industry, this is particularly true. By acting as the gatekeeper for the media industry, government enforced 1973's The Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act, in force to regulate media entry through licensure. It gave government officials, locally known as district magistrates, the power to grant permission to publish newspapers. The law provides the magistrates with the power to cancel the certificate. Clause 20(a) declares that the government can ban a newspaper if anything morally unacceptable is published in it. This also gives government the power to seize any uncertified newspaper (Ahmed, 2006, p. 21).

According to Clause 26, all newspapers must provide government with four complimentary copies of each publication. The Ministry of Information controls broadcast licensing for both commercial and community outlets. Television stations have occasionally been closed apparently arbitrarily, on the plea of breaching broadcasting regulations. Thus, the government has monopoly power to grant or revoke permission for a media outlet that may or may not enter the media business. The government often reminds media outlets that they can revoke a license if television channels do not listen to government orders. All successive governments irrespective of their nature either elected or military use The Printing Presses and Publications Act in both providing license to their party men and revoking licenses of outlets critical of governments.

In the 13 years it was in power, the BAL government issued licenses to over 35 private TV channels, 12 FM Radio stations, and 32 community radio stations. The BNP-led government issued licenses to 10 TV channels (Rahman, 2012).

Along with the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the government in 1975 formulated the “Newspapers (Annulment of Declaration) Ordinance” and banned all political weeklies except the four taken over by the government. Using 1973’s Printing Presses and Publications law, the government in 2010 banned a pro-opposition vernacular daily newspaper called *Dainik Amar Desh* and arrested its editor, Mahmudur Rahman, in 2013. After being held in prison for more than three-and-a-half years, the editor was released on bail, but his newspaper remained suspended. He faces 70 legal charges including sedition and unlawful publication of a hacked conversation between the judges of International Crimes Tribunal, Bangladesh (ICT,B) and an external consultant (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

A military-led government came to power in 2007 under the claim of an emergency. After taking power, it shutdown transmission of *CSB News*, the nation’s first 24-hour Bangla news channel, for “forgery” as government officials were apparently unhappy about transmission of unrest in the nation. In June 2013, the BAL government halted the broadcast of other private channels, *Diganta TV* and *Islamic TV*, on allegations of airing provocative programs to whip up public sentiment. Both channels were tied to the opposition BNP and Bangladesh Jammat-e-Islami (BJI). *Ekushey TV* was shut down by the BNP-Jamaat government in 2002 (Rahman, 2012, p. 87) and in 2010 *Channel One*, owned by a close friend of former prime minister Khaledai Zia’s son, was banned (Banglapaedia; Haq, 2014b; Rahman, 2012). Under the Press Council Act of 1974, Bangladesh got a quasi-judicial institution called Bangladesh Press Council

for “the purpose preserving the freedom of the press and maintaining and improving standard of newspapers and news agencies in Bangladesh.” The Press Council has formulated Code of Conduct for Bangladeshi journalists. Apart from the Code of Conduct, the Council often issues statutory order asking journalists what to follow and what not. In a statement, Bangladesh Press Council in 2019 issued instructions regarding court reporting, urging media not to publish any news or article that might influence the under-trial cases (“Press Council asks media not to publish news that influence trial,” 2019). Other than these, the Information Ministry of the government often issues instructions, both written and verbal, for journalists and forms committee to oversee the activities of the media (Bangladesh govt forms cell to monitor media,” 2020).

### **Monopolies and Political Ownership**

Both the major political parties who have altered power since 1991 follow the same path of giving license for private television channels to party members, particularly members of parliaments, ministers, senior party leaders and their trusted and ideologically tied businessmen (Razzaque, 2013, p. VIII, 36-39). These actions curb the freedom of the said press. The ruling political elites always favor those financial elites who can contribute to their politics both materially and politically. No one can acquire a private television license without the ruling party’s patronage in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 20). A majority of the newspapers and most of the private television channels are aligning themselves with one of the main political factions (BBC, 2016).

There are, however, a few exceptions. They are three leading English-language dailies: *The Daily Star*, *New Age*, and *The Financial Express* and the leading vernacular daily *Prothom*

*Alo.* None of these media outlets extend direct support to any of two major political parties and owners of these media outlets were not directly involved in the politics of these parties.

Issuing TV licenses to party members was initiated during the BNP regime (2001—2006). Ten private satellite television channel licenses were given to all the front rank BNP leaders and their party men. In the following years, the BAL government followed the same path by giving private television licenses to those who were their party men or businessmen affiliated to party. In the years since 2010, the BAL government has issued licenses to 35 individuals. The information ministry issued 16 private satellite channel licenses in the fiscal year of 2013-14 alone (Annual Report, 2015; Mamun, 2015). The domination of ownerships in broadcast media started fading when the BAL government shut down the channels owned by rival political members and began selling them to others after assuming power in 2009 (Haq, 2014). The BAL government banned three TV stations belonging to BNP and Jamaat leaders while the military-backed interim government, which ran the country from 2007 to 2008, shut down another channel.

### **Constitutional and legal provisions**

The Bangladesh constitution has guaranteed freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of speech and expression and freedom of press (Bangladesh Const. art. 39). But the country has several laws that allow press censorship (Bangladesh Const. art. 39, § 2). The section stipulates the authorities can enact laws that curb press freedom, subject to “reasonable restrictions” in the interests of the “security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence” (Bangladesh Const. art. 39, § 2). The country enacted several laws to this end, like the Special



Powers Act 1974 (now annulled), Official Secrets Act, 1923 and ICT Act, 2006. Recently, the country enacted another law titled the Digital Security Act, defying widespread outcry from all walks of life in society including from journalists and rights groups (“Digital Security Bill,” 2018). Amnesty International said the “vague and overly broad provisions” of the new law might be used to “intimidate and imprison journalists and social media users, silence dissent and carry out invasive forms of surveillance” (Amnesty, 2018). Top editors in Dhaka urged Bangladesh's government to overhaul the law saying it will curb press freedom (Mahmud, 2018). International watchdogs like Human Rights Watch have condemned the law saying it is meant to silence critics (“Bangladesh: New Law,” 2018). The latest World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters Without Borders says that Bangladesh slid four notches and is now 150th in the index (“Press Freedom: Bangladesh,” 2019). Meanwhile, in a recent article in Bangladesh’s largest daily, *Prothom Alo*, on the occasion of the latest World Press Freedom Day, former BBC journalist Kamal Ahmed (2019) pointed out that “informal and undeclared censorship” from unseen sources (practically from various government agencies including intelligence agencies) is one of the two primary threats to the press freedom in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2019). The other threat is the cases filed on the pleas of “Defamation” and “Hurting sentiment,” particularly in the issues of religion and the country’s liberation war, either under the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act) or under The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and recently under Digital Security Act. The country has long witnessed arbitrary use of the law on these two pleas -- “Defamation” and “Hurting sentiment”, particularly to silence dissenting voices. Kamal says the government agencies shut down news portals and newspaper whenever they like (Ahmed, 2019).

## Journalist Associations and Professionalism

Bangladesh has a good number of associations of journalists. Jatiya Press Club (National Press Club) with over 1,000 members is situated in the capital city of Dhaka. The club provides a forum for political, social and cultural groups and individuals, for holding press briefings and seminars (Media Landscapes, n.d.). Like the trade unions, the National Press Club is also divided into the groups that are aligned with the two large political parties (Media Landscapes, n.d.). There are other associations called Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) and Dhaka Union of Journalists. The offices of both are housed in the National Press Club building, making the building a hub for journalists.

In addition, the Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) is the largest body of reporters of Dhaka-based newspapers, television and radio, online portals, and news agencies. Founded in 1995 to work for the interests of reporters, it has now 1,500 members. DRU organizes discussions, workshops and computer courses for its members. Politics has less of an influence in DRU than in the National Press Club.

In addition, there are a number of beat-based associations. These include the Bangladesh Parliament Journalists' Association, Dhaka Sub-Editors Council, Bangladesh Photo Journalists Association and the Television Camera Journalists Association. All work to protect the interests of their members (Media Landscapes, n.d.).

The Editors' Council is an organization of editors of the highest-circulation newspapers in the country. Formed in 2013, the organization aims to play an active role in protecting press freedom, developing professionalism, and strengthening the editorial institution (Media Landscapes, n.d.). It often issues statements against government policies or actions that go against the journalistic community (Media Landscapes, n.d.). The Newspaper Owners'

Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) is an organization of newspaper owners. They often use their platform to bargain with the government on different business-related issues (Media Landscapes, n.d.).

These associations are not active in formulating professional guidelines for the journalists. A search of their websites could not find any such documents. Some of them do not even have websites. However, the government enacted a set of Code of Conduct in 1993 under the Press Council Act, which was amended in 2002, for the Newspapers, News Agencies and Journalists of Bangladesh. The 25-point code (reproduced in Appendix B) calls on journalists to be truthful and accurate, but asks them “[n]ot to publish any news or publication detrimental to National Integrity, Independence, Sovereignty, Oneness of State and Constitution of Bangladesh” (see Appendix B). In 2018, the government also passed a bill of Broadcasting Policy, proposing restrictions on the transmission of program, news or advertisements ‘harmful to the country’s history and image, public interest or law and order’ by television and radio networks or online media (Rahman, 2018).

### **Nationalism and Religion in the Bangladeshi media**

Ted Rall (2019) argues that while there is an accepted belief among corporate news outlets that they are responsible for protecting national interests, it should not be the job of journalists. Most of the media outlets in Bangladesh are also aligned with the nationalistic movements and consider the support of that movement part of their journalistic work (Khatun, Abir, Rhaman & Rahman, 2017, p. 98). Dhaka-based journalist Udisa Islam (2019) argues that apart from legal barriers, self-censorship and journalists’ own allegiance to the power structures including the political institutions and ideologies are the two big threats to press freedom in Bangladesh. Udisa argues that journalists are sharply polarized based on their affiliation to

political structures and ideologies (Udisa, 2019). Based on a survey conducted on 100 Bangladeshi journalists aiming at figuring out the relationship between personality traits and some specific psychological occurrences in journalistic work settings, Khan (2005) contends that there is a “clear indication of noticeable relationship between journalists’ personality and their occupational behavior” (p. 79). Inferring the study result, it can be said that journalist’s personality traits influence the media content.

Since its inception in 1971, Bangladesh has developed a unique confrontational political system stemmed from the clash of nationalistic movements. Bangladeshi society is sharply polarized over what should be the nationalism of the country (Hossain, 2015, p. 2, 7). Country’s two major political camps – one is led by BAL and the other is by its arch enemy BNP which have been exchanging power in turn almost since the liberation of the country – are pursuing politics based on two different ideologies. Those are: Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism respectively. The two nationalisms are a bit opposite to each other in terms of their connections to the religion in particular. The advocates of Bengali nationalism say the idea of secular Bengali nationalism is based on the cultures and ethos practiced by Bengali-speaking people. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi nationalism, according to its proponents, is a philosophy primarily based on the culture and ethos of the people of the territory of Muslim majority Bangladesh, irrespective of their ethno-religious identities (Hossain, 2015, p. 3, 16).

Political scientists hold that the Bangladeshi society has been polarized almost vertically on the question of national identity and political philosophy, creating a sustained political instability and uncertainty (Hossain, 2015). They also think that Bangladesh’s longstanding political crisis is rooted at the clash of nationalisms (Maniruzzaman, 2016). Maniruzzaman (2016)

maintains that Bengali nationalism is culturally in close proximity with Hindu religion while Bangladeshi nationalism is pro-Muslim. Hindus are the dominant religious group in the neighboring India which played the role of a midwife to separate East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from the West Pakistan (Kann, 2013).

As would be expected, when the society is polarized on the question of nationalism thanks to its links with religion and journalists are sharply divided along party lines (Hasan, n.d., p. 163), that polarization will influence journalism. These polarizations and divisions essentially force journalists to adopt self-censorship whenever issues connected with their interests and ideologies get in the way of journalism.

Drawing on the above discussion, we can easily infer that the media content in Bangladesh is widely influenced by several factors like government (political institutions), constitutional and legal provisions, nationalism, religion and media institutions (types of ownership), apart from journalist's individual ideological preference and personal trait.

## Chapter IV Findings and Discussion

All of the journalists, media experts, and academics examined for this thesis indicated that the practice of self-censorship plagues Bangladeshi media. According to newspaper articles, the country's president (“গণমাধ্যমে সেলফ সেন্সরশিপ দরকার: রাষ্ট্রপতি,” 2016) and the capital Dhaka's police chief (“জাতীয় স্বার্থে 'সেলফ সেন্সরশিপ' দরকার গণমাধ্যমে: ডিএমপি কমিশনার”, 2019) also openly called on the journalists to exercise self-censorship. In response, Bangladesh's largest circulation daily newspaper, *Prothom Alo*, wrote an editorial and criticized the police chief's call for self-censorship saying: “[W]hen the [police] commissioner says something like that, it spells bad news for the journalists” (“Self-censorship' of the media,” 2019).

Many of examples of self-censorship among the Bangladeshi media exist. In his blog, British journalist David Bergman (2019), who worked as a journalist in Bangladesh for years and was forced to leave the country, cited a glaring example of self-censorship. Bergman used the example of journalists having access to a recorded telephone conversation between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her UK Awami League party leaders. In the recorded conversation, Hasina referred to the question of whether Khaleda Zia, the leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) who was in jail at that time, would be allowed out of jail. Hasina emphatically said in the conversation that if Tarique Rahman (Khaleda's son and now BNP's acting chairman who is now self-exiling in UK) shows his arrogance with the prime minister, Khaleda Zia would never be able to come out of jail in her lifetime (Bergman, 2019). Bergman noted that “not a single media outlet in Bangladesh (as far as this blog can make out) actually reported on this conversation although this video was widely distributed” as “no one would dare to report on this conversation” (Bergman, 2019).

Another example of self-censorship comes from a copy-editor of Bangladesh's highest circulated English-language daily newspapers, *The Daily Star*. The copy editor, Badiuzzaman Bay, demonstrated how he slants the news article by changing words and terms to make content more acceptable to perceived powers within society. For example, Bay noted that "the system" is used instead of "the government," "the student wing of the ruling party" instead of "Bangladesh Chhatra League," and the vague term "something else" is used instead of "military" (Bay, 2019). As Bay suggests, directly mentioning of the government, Bangladesh Chhatra League or the military in the news may entail risks for the concerned journalists and the daily.

Journalists do not exercise as much restraint when mentioning the opposition political party, BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), as Bay (2019) noted, "BNP becomes more than BNP," suggesting that journalists can mention BNP in any case no matter what, as it will not entail any risk. Mentioning the BNP by name will please the ruling party BAL (Bay, 2019).

As Bay describes self-censorship among Bangladeshi journalists, "Names are replaced by titles, facts deleted, if not altered, and headings robbed of their 'spark'" (Bay, 2019). Bay attributes two factors behind the self-censorship: the government and the employer. He puts it this way:

My deleted sentences, in the end, are a painful reminder of all the times that I had to swallow my pride, toe the line drawn either by the government or by my employers oh-so afraid of consequences, and put an end to the illusion of control over my own life (Bay, 2019).

The journalists examined in this study willfully spoke of the sources of self-censorship (*i.e.* why Bangladeshi media and journalists are exercising self-censorship, or what factors were

pushing journalists and Bangladeshi media as a whole to exercise self-censorship). Different journalists spoke of two or three or four different sources of self-censorship, although many of them touched on the same reasons. An analysis of the reasons the journalists referred to for the self-censorship, a total of six sources that push Bangladeshi media to exercise self-censorship were found. The sources of self-censorship are:

1. Legal Barriers
2. Government Interference
3. Ownership
4. Advertising
5. Political Partisanship as Unprofessional Activity
6. Religion

### **Legal Barriers**

As discussed earlier, the country's legal structure regarding press freedom or media freedom has established several laws and acts that the government or the various government agencies can exploit to influence media practices. The ICT Act and the Digital Security Act, in particular, have created a sense of fear among the journalists. As many as 32 journalists told *Reuters* that they are "living in fear of ever-tightening media laws and engaging in self-censorship as a result" (Paul, Quadir, & Siddiqui, 2018). Daily *Manabzaman* editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury told *Reuters* that he will at times make the decision to not publish a news report "purely to save the reporter" as he knows "the risks involved in publishing it" (Paul, Quadir, & Siddiqui, 2018).

At times the pressure on journalists is less subtle. Mahfuz Anam, who has been the editor of *The Daily Star* for 25 years, told *Reuters* that he used to write a column regularly and



fearlessly, but now, he seldom writes a column. Anam has been charged with defamation and treason in more than 80 cases filed by ruling BAL party workers in 2016, with damages sought exceeding \$8 billion (Paul, Quadir, & Siddiqui, 2018).

Fahmidul Haq, who teaches journalism, says that the ICT Act and the Digital Security Act “have emerged to be tough laws in respect to freedom of expression” and cases are being filed against journalists and online users (Haq, 2019). British journalist David Bergman writes that government party activists have filed dozens of criminal cases against the same newspaper editors. In addition, “dozens of journalists and editors have been arrested under the vague and arbitrary Information, Communication, Technology and Communication Act; and there is a high degree of censorship and - rather obviously - self-censorship. Television is particularly controlled” (Bergman, 2018).

Journalist Kamal Ahmed said misuse of the provision of contempt court and libel suits is being used in Bangladesh to influence journalists. “Even treason case was not spared” (Ahmed, 2017). Talking about the recently enacted Digital Security Act, Mahfuz Anam said the very existence of the Act would destroy “all of enthusiasm and efforts of journalists” (Anam, 2019). Anam attributed the Digital Security Act and libel suits to creating a sense of fear in the journalistic arena, resulting in a sharp rise in self-censorship. As one journalist said, “We don’t publish most of the news items nowadays” (Anam, 2019). In an interview with *The Daily Star*, the country’s leading Bengali-language daily, *Prothom Alo* editor Matiur Rahman said some laws like the amended ICT Act of 2013 and Digital Security Act have made journalism risky and, as a result, journalists cannot write or publish what they think should be published (Rahman, 2019).

It is clear that legal barriers have a powerful influence on the work of journalists. These

laws, whether they are used or not, serve to influence journalists out of fear of facing legal problems. In short, the mere existence of legal barriers, whether used or not, can prompt journalists to self-censor. And as journalists seem to understand, if these legal barriers are used against one journalist it can serve as a powerful reminder to other journalists to not step out of line.

### **Government Interference**

While legal barriers can be powerful instruments of self-censorship, these legal barriers are rarely aligned with a single ruling party. For example, defamation laws are available to all people within society, even though certain groups might be more likely to use them against the press. The second factor in self-censorship, government interference, differs from the factor of legal barriers in significant ways. Government interference describes the very real political pressure that ruling political parties put on journalists, either openly or covertly.

The ruling political party is synonymous with government in Bangladesh. Government exploits all the tools available to it to mount pressure on media outlets. Government enacts and uses various laws against journalists and media houses. In addition to government using the legal apparatus and sometimes arbitrary orders to control journalists, it also often engages in intimidation tactics. These tactics can include things such as filing legal cases against journalists, phone calls from intelligence agents, barring journalists from covering certain events, and blocking government ads to certain media outlets (Bergman, 2018). Government ads are the primary source of revenue for the media in Bangladesh, particularly for the newspapers. It is estimated that the government ads comprise as much as 70 percent of ad market in Bangladesh (Ghatak, 2019).

Journalists often call this sort of government interference “bad political atmosphere” (as

in, “We can’t publish that because of the bad political atmosphere”). Talking to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Matiur Rahman, the editor of Bangladesh’s top daily *Prothom Alo*, said the current BAL government thinks that “independent media is working against it” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). Matiur Rahman claimed that his “staffers are often followed by intelligence agents” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015).

This pressure, both covert and overt, has consequences for what is published. Mahfuz Anam also reported government pressure. As he told the Committee to Protect Journalists, “Over the past year, the media has gone into a mode of self-censorship.” Anam alleged that the government has become “totally intolerant to critical voices” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). Photojournalist Shahidul Alam, one of the persons of the year selected by *Time* magazine in 2018, said much of the media has “essentially made themselves spokespeople for the government” (Alam, 2019). He said whenever “someone says anything that does not toe the [ruling] party line somewhere and another, it is blocked” (Alam, 2019). Daily *New Age* editor Nurul Kabir said journalists are “intimidated directly or indirectly by the government agencies as well as the ruling party hoodlums” (Kabir, 2015). Kabir (2015) said the government closed down several television channels and newspaper editors were arrested. He himself was “subject to different kinds of intimidation many times” (Kabir, 2015).

Forms of intimidation can also be covert and subtle. Reazuddin Ahmed, a former editor of the daily newspaper *News Today*, said restrictions come from the government through “novel unwritten means” and as a result media have started exercising self-censorship (“গণমাধ্যমের স্বাধীনতা ও দায়বদ্ধতা”, 2010). By “novel unwritten means,” Ahmed essentially referred to phone calls from intelligence agencies and other forms of intimidation which were mentioned by others above. Kamal Ahmed said the government’s “unseen control” over the media has created a lack

of trust among the people in the media and which is in its peak (Ahmed, 2019). In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, journalist Shaukat Mahmood said the media outlets get phone calls from different government agencies with instructions about what should and should not be published (Swapan, 2019). Fahmidul Haq said a cloud of fear has swept across the country which is a key obstacle to freedom of expression (Haq, 2019). He said much of the media are now under government control (Haq, 2019). In the interview with *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo* editor Matiur Rahman said his daily gets a very little of the government ads (Rahman, 2019). In one of his articles, daily *Manab Zamin* editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury (2018) shed light on a gloomy picture of self-censorship his colleagues are exercising in fear of losing jobs that stemmed from the government interference or “bad political atmosphere”. Chowdhury said journalists can lose their jobs or their access to information and sources because of their reportage. This at times happens even without the knowledge of their editors (Chowdhury, 2018).

Chowdhury referenced a practice where if a journalist angers powerful governmental authorities, the editor of the particular journalist receives phone call from that powerful quarter with a message that the particular journalist should be fired immediately. And Chowdhury’s claim is seconded by *Prothom Alo* journalist Tipu Sultan who told the Committee to Protect Journalists that “those not supporting the ruling Awami League are in the line of fire” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). Bangladesh Awami League has been in power since 2009.

Government interference plays an important role in journalistic self-censorship. Government in Bangladesh attempts to overtly influence the work that journalists do through legal means, by intimidating them, by having them followed by governmental agents, and by

pressuring both journalists and editors. However, government also works covertly through unwritten rules, limiting access to information and sources, and changing the rules of the game.

## **Ownership**

As the literature on journalistic self-censorship notes, ownership often plays an important role as to what content journalists feel it acceptable to cover. Ownership can influence news content by directly issuing orders to cover or not to cover certain people or events or issues, but it can also influence content through more subtle means. These more subtle influences can be everything from hiring or promotion of editors to changes in newsroom policy.

Ownership influences journalistic self-censorship in Bangladesh in several different ways. Since the government controls broadcast licenses, owners pressure journalists to engage in self-censorship to make sure the government does not cancel their broadcast license. Media owners, however, also have many different economic interests, some related to the government and some not. Media owners work to make sure that journalists do not have a negative influence on those other economic sources.

Mentioning that the current government has issued licenses for many television channels, journalist Prohash Amin said the journalists are engaging in self-censorship not only because of their fear of the government, but because it serves to protect their own interests and their loyalty to a certain political party (Amin, 2019). *Bdnews24.com* editor Toufique Imroje Khalidi alleged that “wicked people” have become the owners of the Bangladeshi media and that’s why the problem of self-censorship has arisen (Khalidi, 2015). Khalidi (2015) attributed having other businesses by media owners to one of the reasons of self-censorship by the particular media outlet. The media owners obtain licenses by “maintaining relations with politicians and pay toll to them (the politicians)” Khalidi (2015).

Echoing Khalidi, journalist Maswood Kamal said the owners of as much as “95 per cent of Bangladeshi media organizations” set up media outlets for their “business interests” (Kamal, 2020). Kamal (2020) said rich people and industrialists open media houses and maintain journalists as their henchmen to protect their properties. Kamal (2020) alleged that *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* – Bangladesh’s two top dailies – did not publish a report against KFC just because they were owned by the same owner. Referring to the editor of another leading vernacular daily newspaper, *Ittefaq*, being a minister for two terms, Kamal asked whether the daily published any news on the corruption in his ministry (Kamal, 2020).

In an interview with *Safenewsrooms.org*, journalist Supriti Dhar said the media owners usually exercise “some sort of censorships, especially if it goes against their interests, monetary or otherwise” (Dhar, 2018). Dhar (2018) said the owners “usually control the editors and through them all the journalists working at such media houses”. The newsrooms “have to operate as per the leanings of the owners, given that the media industry is very owner-driven” (Dhar, 2018).

In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, *The Daily Observer* editor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury said that in the past owners used to set up media outlets with a certain noble vision, but it has now “become like a job, rather than a profession thanks to corporate culture” (Chowdhury, 2019), suggesting that media outlets as well as journalists are now more interested in protecting their job for their livelihood, rather than upholding journalistic values, *i.e.* telling the truth despite odds. In such a culture, neither media outlets nor journalists publish reports which entail risks. Chowdhury (2019) said that against this backdrop many journalists are making compromises either with the government or with business establishments and with other interests, for their personal gains.

## Advertising

Advertising is an important influence on self-censorship within journalism, although often journalists seek to deny that influence. As the profitability of journalism has decreased over the years, the need to attract and retain advertisers has become ever more important. In journalistic content, this can mean writing stories that will attract or help retain advertisers, but also withholding certain stories or information that aligns with the interests of advertisers.

While the influence of ownership is a real concern among Bangladeshi journalists, that concern is often coupled with fears about the influence of advertisers. As noted earlier, the government in Bangladesh controls up to 70 percent of the advertising market, giving government the ability to pressure journalists by withholding advertising revenue. However, journalists also reported feeling influence from private-sector advertisers.

Saiful Islam Chowdhury, a Dhaka University faculty member who is also a former journalist, said journalists sometimes work as “a puppet of the government or sometimes as a puppet of multinational companies” (Chowdhury, 2019). According to Chowdhury, it is more important to journalists to serve the needs of advertisers and media owners than to serve the public (Chowdhury, 2019). Chowdhury said a culture of fear has gripped journalists thanks to pressure from political and economic factors (Chowdhury, 2019) as the newspaper revenue model based on advertisement is failing to some extent in Bangladesh, much like the rest of the world (Uddin, 2020). *Bhorer Kagoj* Editor Shyamal Dutta said the Bangladeshi media don't write “against corporate houses fearing losing revenue from advertisements” (“গণমাধ্যমের স্বাধীনতা ও দায়বদ্ধতা,” 2010). Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury (2019) noted that the media sometimes refuse to oppose the requests of advertisers. In the corporate culture, the owners and advertisers often try to influence journalists and control the media.

Against this backdrop, sometimes journalists refuse to stand up to the influence of advertisers (Chowdhury, 2019). Journalist Tushar Abdullah, head of news for television news channel *Somoy News*, admitted that they often face pressure from the advertisers (University of Asia Pacific, 2016). “Before airing a news item,” Abdullah said, “I need to rethink several times whether I should air it or not; whether it will enrage that brother or that sister.” Abdullah suggested that they always need to think twice if their news reports will enrage anyone from either from political leadership or from corporate world. Abdullah expressed his dismay saying: “My [press] freedom is being sold only for Tk 500 Tk 800 Tk 2000,” (University of Asia Pacific, 2016). Journalist J. E. Mamun, head of news for television channel *ATN Bangla*, alleged that the electronic media in Bangladesh has become accountable to government, the ruling political party and to the financiers who give the media ads (“গণমাধ্যমের স্বাধীনতা ও দায়বদ্ধতা,” 2010).

### **Partisanship and Unprofessional Activity**

Some of the journalists and media experts analyzed for this project identified political partisanship as being an important factor in self-censorship. These journalists tended to see that partisanship (or what some labeled advocacy journalism) as falling short of the professional responsibilities expected of journalists in Bangladesh.

Saiful Islam Chowdhury, (2019) in his opinion piece in *Deutsche Welle*, said partisan loyalty (*i.e.*, loyalty toward a certain political party or group) has emerged as an Achilles’ heel in Bangladeshi journalism. As I discussed earlier, Bangladesh’s society is sharply polarized on political questions and so are journalists. Many of the journalists side with the political party they like. They show their loyalty to their party both covertly and overtly. Chowdhury noted that thanks to the culture of political loyalty, a tendency of advocacy journalism has increased widely in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2019).



Tushar Abdullah, head of news at *Somoy TV*, said Bangladesh's journalism has turned out to be partisan journalism (University of Asia Pacific, 2016). Describing the state of journalists, Abdullah said journalists, while producing a news item, think about their future standing within a political party or professional organizations. Could they be the minister (press) after five years? Will they be members of Press Club, Press Council or the Press Institute of Bangladesh? In Bangladesh, journalists who show their loyalty to a certain political party throughout their journalistic careers are often rewarded toward the end of their journalistic career. These rewards might include a position in government if the political party they are aligned with stays in power. These positions can include the post of Minister (Press), a lucrative position in Bangladesh embassies, the post of Press Secretary (PS) or Assistant Press Secretary (APS) of the Prime Minister or with any position, or a position in the government or in the state run bodies like the Press Council and Press Institute of Bangladesh. These positions are like dream destinations for the journalists having political partisan loyalty. So they always think, while doing the reportage, as to how they can serve the particular political party best so that he or she can get any of the above mentioned positions toward the end of their journalistic career. That's why Abdullah said those journalists always feel pressure from within themselves to serve a certain political party (University of Asia Pacific, 2016).

Journalist Mustafa Feroz, head of news for *Bangla Vision* TV channel, (2020) said journalists are divided along political party lines and this phenomenon makes them more responsible to the respective party than to the journalism profession. Feroz added, "Whenever their party comes to power, that group of journalists tries to show more allegiance to that party" (Feroz, 2020).

Nayeemul Islam Khan, editor of daily newspaper *Amader Orthoneeti*, described how a

partisan journalist engages in self-censorship while doing news reporting. He used this hypothetical example:

I'm running a newspaper of BNP's (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) ideology. What I will do is: I will intentionally publish a news item on the weaknesses of Awami League (the arch-enemy of BNP). . . . This is because of my political bias (Mishu, 2016).

Journalist Masood Kamal (2020) said journalists belonging to a certain political camp would never find anything wrong in the governance of their party when it is in power. Kamal said, "This is very unfortunate that journalists in Bangladesh behave like political goons" (Kamal, 2020).

Journalist Shaukat Mahmood talked about the reasons behind the partisan loyalty of journalists (Mahmood, 2019). Mahmood (2019) noted that apart from shared ideological beliefs, there are other reasons for journalists being partisans. First of all, a pro-government journalist gets advantages in securing jobs (both in the government and in the state-run media outlets) and secures social advantages such as land allocation opportunities (by the government agencies), and the opportunity for foreign trips (Mahmood, 2019).

Dhaka University faculty member Gitiara Nasreen alleged that media can be purchased. She said you can make "the media speak either against or in favor of any issue" ("গণমাধ্যমের স্বাধীনতা ও দায়বদ্ধতা," 2010). Nasreen suggested that media outlets or journalists write stories in favor of somebody or something or decide not to publish stories or self-censor if they are purchased (*i.e.* influenced by the means of money and/or political power).

Fahmidul Haq (2019) said there are some "dependent media outlets" which "work to divert normal political activities to a different direction" (Haq, 2019). By the term "dependent media," Haq was referring to media outlets which get financial backing from political forces,

particularly from the ruling government or any other power structures. These media outlets often embark on a propaganda campaign in favor of their masters and while doing so, they resort to self-censorship and the distortion of information.

## **Religion**

Religious topics are sensitive in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's largest circulation daily, *Prothom Alo*, had to discontinue its weekly satire magazine *Alpin* after it published a cartoon-cat named Mohammad (Majumder, 2007). The cartoonist was arrested, the publisher of newspaper apologized and appealed for forgiveness following street protests about the publication.

Given the sensitivity of the religious topics, journalists and media outlets often exercise self-censorship while publishing religious news. Freedom House, a US-government funded, non-profit research and advocacy organization, reported in 2019 that online journalists and social media commentators "continue to report a climate of self-censorship on political and religious topics in Bangladesh" (Freedom House, 2019). Journalist Supriti Dhar, in the interview with *Safeneewsrooms.org*, said after the government machinery, religious "extremist groups" are one of the pressure groups that "force newsroom to censor" (Dhar, 2018). There are several Islam-based political parties and groups that take to the streets whenever they believe the media have offended their religious beliefs. However, none of other journalists based on whose views this study is conducted spoke of religion as a factor for self-censorship in Bangladesh.

## Chapter V Conclusion

This project set out to find answers to one main research question: What factors do journalists see as the most important influence on self-censorship in Bangladesh?

Through an analysis of interviews and published reports by journalists and other media experts, a number of factors influencing self-censorship have been identified. The most important factors, and the most commonly discussed by journalists and media experts, were legal barriers, governmental influence, and political partisanship as unprofessional activity. It is clear that in Bangladesh there exists a form of self-censorship that is enforced through institutional forces, whether those forces be judicial, governmental, or political party. Those institutional forces punish journalists who violate legal standards or do not reinforce the beliefs of the government or political party. Journalists who do reinforce those beliefs are rewarded with access to information, governmental positions, opportunities to travel and other rewards not commonly available to all people in Bangladesh. The study findings appear to lend credence to Peter Wood's suspicion that "Cowardice and conformity-for-conformity's-sake" to avoid hassle is responsible for most self-censorship (Peter Wood, 2019, p.604).

Journalists and media experts also discussed ownership, advertising and religious beliefs as being factors, but these were less commonly acknowledged. It is interesting that even when journalists and media experts discussed these influences, they were often discussed as being part of the country's institutional framework. For example, the fear of publishing content that will irritate advertisers was often discussed as a fear of losing governmental advertising. And the impact of ownership was at times linked to how government or political parties are connected to media ownership.

Religion is also an interesting factor in self-censorship. In the early stages of this research

project, it was believed that religion would be seen as an important element of self-censorship. Only one out of 38 journalists and a media watchdog identified for this project explicitly linked religion as a factor in self-censorship. However, this does not mean that religion is not an important element of self-censorship in Bangladesh. Rather, it might be that religion (as some of the research in the literature review suggests), has become so closely intertwined with government and political parties that it is not seen as being separate from institutional politics by journalists. In other words, religion is not separate from government and political parties, but is part of government and political parties. It can also be assumed that Bangladeshi journalists, on the question of religion, maintain “sphere of consensus” of the theory of media objectivity posited by journalism historian Daniel C. Hallin in his book *The Uncensored War* (1987).

This study helps us understand how journalists adopt self-censorship into their work in Bangladesh. Self-censorship can be employed as a way to avoid punishment from powerful forces, providing journalists some degree of freedom to continue to work. And self-censorship can also be employed as a way to secure unethical personal gains. This study shows us how self-censorship becomes the new normal for the journalists in Bangladesh. It also lends credence to the idea that news is a social construction and reinforces the idea that media content is dependent upon various forces that operate within any country.

Horton (2011) argues that the agents/people/institutions who will have an “element of reluctance, and a feeling of resentment” while censoring should not be called the self-censors thanks to their unwillingness to censor (p. 100). Horton contends that the self-censorship caused of others’ action can be thought of as justified (Horton, 2011, p. 102). But those who censor themselves “on their own volition and being uncoerced by others are, according to Horton’s view, the true self-censors (Horton, 2011, p. 99, 100). The study findings show that Bangladesh

has got both of Horton's types of self-censorships. An analysis of the six factors would clearly tell us that self-censorship stemming from Political Partisanship is a willful act. Journalists who exercise self-censorship for their political partisanship do it willingly, spontaneously and without coercion by others. So, in Horton's view, it is true self-censorship. On the other hand, it was not known in this study whether or not the censors or a portion of censors (*i.e.*, Bangladeshi journalists or the media outlets) exercise self-censorship show reluctance or some sort of reluctance in case of the other five factors – Legal Barriers, Governmental Interference, Ownership, Advertising, and Religion. All of these five factors are extra-personal *i.e.* the self-censorship stemmed from these factors is exercised under coercion by extra-personal factors. So, the journalists and media outlets who self-censor for these five factors with reluctance and without their own volition can be justified, at least to some extent, as per Horton's view.

Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann (2013) categorize two types of self-censorship: One is public self-censorship and the other is private self-censorship. Public self-censorship is exercised in response to an externally existing censor or public censor. Private self-censorship is exercised in the absence of an external censor (*i.e.* without any coercion). In light of these views, Bangladesh has got both types of self-censorship. Again, private self-censorship which is exercised through an individual's "internalization of some external set of values," such as "the norms of an association," is called Private Self-censorship by Proxy. The second type of private self-censorship, exercised in response to an individual's suppression of his or her own attitudes even in the absence of an explicitly external or public influence, they term private self-censorship by self-restraint. Bangladesh has all of these types of self-censorship.

Bangladesh's politics is rooted in the issue of nationalism and has been ever since the country was born in 1971. Journalistic work, as well as the country's media, is deeply rooted in

the issue of nationalism, too. Most of the journalists and the media outlets think that upholding the nationalism they believe in is their patriotic duty, while exercising journalism. In so doing, they think that it is their responsibility to write against the people belonging to the other side of the line of nationalism and to write in favor of the people belonging to their side. The partisanship comes from, in their words “patriotic conviction.” Most of the media outlets of the country and journalists proudly announce their conviction to defend and uphold the spirits of country’s liberation war (“চেতনায় মুক্তিযুদ্ধ কণ্ঠে মহাকাল,” 2020; Jubayer, 2018; & Rahman, 2018). In doing so, almost all of the media outlets and journalists think that they should write against the people and the political parties (mostly religion-based parties) who opposed the country’s liberation in 1971 and it is the unofficial/undeclared yet widely accepted policy of the media as a whole in Bangladesh. It seems that this issue falls in the Sphere of Consensus of Hallin’s model of objectivity. Given the sensitivity of the issue (*i.e.* country’s liberation), none dare to come out of this Sphere of Consensus, lending credence to Todd Gitlin’s claim that the “ideologies of the dominant social powers” sway journalists as to what stories should be covered (Gitlin, 1980, p. 250-251). So, when this issue comes before the journalists, they either self-censor or embark on a propaganda campaign against the opposition.

After the two biggest influences – legal and governmental – which entirely depend on the will of the ruling political structure, partisanship of journalist and ownership, which essentially come from the political philosophy of the journalists and the owners of the media, play the largest role in shaping media content in Bangladesh. Although religion does not have a visible influence on the media, it has a wider impact in the country’s politics and society and thus on journalism. It is suspected that a different methodology might be able to draw on the influence and importance of religion. Therefore, all of the six factors that push journalists or Bangladeshi

media to self-censor are well-linked with the country's politics. It appears that journalism and politics are nothing but the two sides of the same coin. In other words, country's politics play an instrumental role in shaping the media content in Bangladesh. If we think about improving journalism, I mean if we think of making journalism as it should be, this study gives us an important insight about what is not possible unless we think about improving the political climate of the country. It appears that journalism will never be able to reach a stage where it should be as long as long Bangladeshi politics allows it to do so.

### **Project Limitations and Further Study**

While this study has identified some factors that push journalists and the media as a whole to exercise self-censorship, relying on published interviews and writings has its limitations. Due to the method used for this project, I was unable to ask how journalists work and to ask people to explain concepts or ideas in more depth. Clearly a study employing some form of in-depth analysis or ethnographic research would be a valuable addition to this project. Although the media-content influencing factors identified in this study clearly fit into the Hierarchy of Influence model, it's difficult to demarcate which factor of influence comes from exactly which level as the study could not give us a detailed map of the dynamics of the factors and particularly when the boundaries of the levels of influence model are themselves fuzzy.

Any future study employing methods such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic study could offset the shortcomings of this study. The study's findings, however, give us an idea of the state of journalistic self-censorship in Bangladesh. There has been not a lot of academic work on how self-censorship plays a role in Bangladeshi media. This study also gives us an idea about the socio-political structure of Bangladesh as well as how much that structure influences content before it reaches readers and viewers. Despite its limitations, this study can best be viewed as the



beginning of a deeper understanding of how the workings of Bangladeshi media and its role as a vital institution of a democratic society and how self-censorship often obstructs the functioning of a democratic society.

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%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%96%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8B-  
%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AB%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%AD%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%  
AC%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%9F%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%87-  
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**Appendix**  
**List of Journalists, Editors, and Media Experts**

1. Kamal Ahmed, journalist
2. Shahidul Alam, photojournalist
3. Probhash Amin, journalists
4. Mahfuz Anam, editor, The Daily Star
5. Saiful Alam, editor, daily Jugantor
6. Badiuzzaman Bay, journalist
7. David Bergman, journalist
8. Iqbal Sobhan Chowhdury, editor, The Daily Observer
9. Shaukat Mahmood, editor, weekly Economic Times
10. Saiful Alam Chowdhury, former journalist and associate professor of Mass  
Communication and Journalist, Dhaka University
11. Elias Hossain, journalist
12. Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, editor, daily Manabzamin
13. Tipu Sultan, journalist
14. Matiur Rahman, editor, daily Prothom Alo
15. Supriti Dhar, journalist and women activist
16. Mustafa Feroz, journalist
17. Masood Kamal, journalist
18. Nurul Kabir, editor, daily New Age
19. Toufique Imroje Khalidi, editor, bdnews24.com
20. Tushar Abdullah, journalist

21. Nayeemul Islam Khan, journalist
22. Fahmidul Haque, visiting research professor, University of Notre Dame
23. Nuruzzaman Labu, journalist
24. Faisal Mahmud, journalist
25. Muktadir Rashid, journalist
26. Zafar Sobhan, editor, daily Dhaka Tribune
27. Jasim Uddin, journalist
28. Mahmudur Rahman, acting editor, daily Amardesh (shut by govt)
29. Reazuddin Ahmed, journalist
30. Shykhe Seraj, director, channel i
31. Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul, journalist
32. Shyamal Dutta, editor, daily Bhorer Kagoj
33. Sanaullah, journalist
34. J. E. Mamun, journalist
35. Munni Saha, journalist
36. Golam Sarwar, journalist
37. Gitiara Nasreen, journalism professor, University of Dhaka
38. Jashim Uddin, journalist

## **Appendix B**

### **Code of Conduct 1993 (2002 as amended) for the Newspapers and News Agencies:**

1. Not to publish any news or publication detrimental to National Integrity, Independence, sovereignty, Oneness of State and Constitution of Bangladesh.
2. The War of Liberation and its spirit and ideals must be sustained and upheld, and any publication repugnant to it to be stopped.
3. It is the responsibility of a journalist to keep people informed of issues which influence or attract them. News and commentaries are to be prepared and published showing full respect to the sensitivity and individual rights of newspaper readers as well as the people
4. Truth and accuracy of information available are to be ensured as far as possible.
5. Information received from reliable sources may be published in the public interest induced by honest intention and if facts presented therein are considered trustworthy by logical consideration, then a journalist is to be absolved from any adverse consequence for publication of such news.
6. Unconfirmed reports or reports based on rumours shall be verified before publication and if found unreasonable on verification, be withheld from publication.
7. News items whose contents are distorted and baseless or whose publication hinges on breach of trust not to be published.
8. Newspapers and journalists having the right to express their views on controversial issues and in doing so:
  - a) All events should be truthfully reported and views be clearly expressed.
  - b) No report of an event is distorted to influence the readers.
  - c) No news shall be distorted or slanted maliciously either in the main commentary or in the headline.
  - d) Views on main news shall be presented clearly and fairly.
9. The editor having the right to publish any advertisement signed by proper authorities in his/her newspaper even if it is apparently against any individual interest should not be slanderous or prejudicial to public interest. If protest is made with regard to such an advertisement, the editor shall print and publish it without any cost.
10. Newspapers shall refrain from publishing news which is contemptuous or disrespectful to caste, creed, nationality and religion of any individual or the community or the country. For upholding national unity, communal prejudices and feelings of hatred and malice be discouraged.
11. If a newspaper publishes any news which prejudices the interest and good name of an individual, agency, institution or group of people or any special category of people, then the newspaper concerned should provide opportunity to the aggrieved persons or institutions to publish their protest or state their point of view on the matter within a reasonable period of time.
12. If the published news is damaging or improper, then withdrawal, corrigendum or explanation be made and in special cases, apology should be tendered.
13. For the increase of circulation of newspaper no vulgar, derogatory, ghastly news and picture though attractive to the people, be published.
14. Newspapers should adopt reasonable measures with a view to resisting crime and corruption.
15. As extent and durability of the influence of newspapers is greater than that of other media, a journalist writing for newspaper shall particularly be cautious about the credibility and truthfulness of sources and shall also preserve his source material in order to avoid risks.
16. It is the responsibility of the newspapers to publish news relating to case under trial and to publish the final judgment of the court to reveal the actual picture of issues relating to trial. But a journalist shall refrain from publishing such comment or opinion as is likely to influence an under-trial case, until the final verdict is announced.
17. Rejoinder of the aggrieved party or parties directly involved with news published in a newspaper shall be quickly published in the same newspaper on such page as would easily draw the attention of the readers. The editor, while editing the rejoinder shall not change its basic character.
18. If an aggrieved party sends a rejoinder for the damage done to him by an editorial, it shall be the



obligation of the editor to publish the corrigendum on the same page and also express regrets.

19. Malicious news should not be published.

20. The editor is to accept full responsibility for all publications in the newspaper.

21. A reporter while reporting a case of financial or other kind of irregularity shall, to the best of his ability, verify the facts in his report and shall incorporate adequate material to prove the truth of the matter reported.

22. Any irresponsible publication to which no objection was taken cannot be source of news but a journalist cannot shirk his responsibility on the ground of reprinting the same.

23. It is a responsibility of a journalist to highlight any news which projects degeneration of moral values in the society but it is also the moral responsibility of a journalist to maintain strict precaution in publishing news / photo involving man-woman relationship or any report relating to woman.

24. Any person who will join in a service of newspaper or new agency or any media of news shall be bound to take oath and sign in presence of the editor as per form "Ka" as attached with this Code of Conduct.

25. Any publisher of a newspaper shall take oath and sign under section 11(2)(b) of the Press Council Act, as per form "Kha" as attached with this Code of Conduct.