New Media in Film Distribution in Bangladesh: Bane or Boon?

The research explores the little-understood phenomena of new media based film distribution system in Bangladesh, finds the consequences of new media in film distribution, and makes a recommendation for developing an effective film distribution system. This research employs a qualitative approach where in-depth interviews of the people involved in traditional and online film distribution systems are taken to collect data. The study finds that new media based film distribution is an emerging sector in Bangladesh, and it will strengthen the distribution system by reducing the distribution cost and increasing the revenue.

Keywords: new media, internet, online, film distribution, video on demand

Introduction

This research explores the utilization of new media in film distribution in Bangladesh, finds the consequences of new media-based film distribution and searches for ways to establish an effective film distribution system based on new media.

The process by which a film reaches the marketplace and is made available to its target audience is called film distribution, where it is done by selling a film to different gateways like theatrical distributors, broadcast networks, DVD companies, and new-media outlets (Parks, 2007). In this process, fixing release dates and launching advertising campaigns are also done by the distributors (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008).

The film distribution system of Bangladesh is going through a crisis in the present time. The digital era has made the industry experiencing different problems. The emergence of new media has raised a question to think about reorganizing the distribution system. According to Neese (2016), social media, blogs, video games, and online news outlets are typically referred to as 'new media' and these channels of communication have far-reaching implications for society, business, and politics. Different terms like digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked, and simulated define new media (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2009). The popular culture of new media has been started with the video games (Lister et al., p. 237) where the term 'new media' refers to the 'Internet' and also a virtual environment, digital TV or blog (Lister et al., p. 12). Again, 'Internet' is said the collection of networks that links computers and servers together (Lister et al., p. 164). In recent times conventional movie distribution system is being modified in the entire globe after the upward push of new media, which are sort of media that might be native to computer systems, computational and relying on computers for distribution like YouTube, Netflix, Amazon and so forth. Bangladesh is also going through the change as new media is being utilized in film distribution...
here, but it is an unknown area as it is still not explored by academics about the change in the distribution process. As Cunningham, Silver, & McDonnell (2010) argue that Online Distribution is servicing independent and the rest-of-the-world cinema where online refers to the new media, it is essential to learn about the present state of online film distribution in Bangladesh to analyze the impacts of it on the whole distribution system.

Three companies, Bongo, Bioscope, and Iflix, are distributing feature films along with other video contents in Bangladesh. Bongo is the first VOD (video on demand) platform of the country that started streaming in 2012 (M. Rahman, personal communication, May 8, 2018). Bioscope is started in 2016 as a value-added service of Grameenphone, a leading mobile service operator in Bangladesh, which is supported by Telenor, a Norwegian multinational telecommunications company (M. Rahman, personal communication, May 8, 2018). Iflix is a multinational VOD streaming site that started its journey in Bangladesh in 2017, which is supported by the Malaysian originated leading telecommunications group Axiata and in Bangladesh, by Robi Axiata Limited (S.R. Islam, personal communication, May 8, 2018). Two companies named Khona Talkies and Indi Minds distribute Bangladeshi short and feature films in different international film festivals. Khona Talkies started distribution in 2011 (A. Rakhine, personal communication, May 12, 2018) and Indi Minds in 2016 (S. K Paul, personal communication, March 1, 2018).

The study investigates the little-understood phenomena, that is the use of new media for distributing films, to find out the impacts of new media in film distribution system with a view to finding the ways for developing an effective film distribution system in Bangladesh.

Significance of the Study

In Bangladesh, the whole film industry is facing different kinds of problems. Film distribution is also facing problems as the system is not able to return the invested money to the producer. The monopoly of the booking agents made distributors fall into great problems while distributing films (Khan, 2017). However, the proper distribution system can be a remedy to this problem, and the utilization of new media in film distribution can be the trump card to set the least active distribution system an effective one. For that reason, it needs to explore the present situation of new media based film distribution in Bangladesh to understand the impacts of new media on the film distribution process. It will also provide suggestions to establish an effective distribution system utilizing new media.
Literature Review

This section aims to assess the essential scholarly works on new media based film distribution. The key arguments, methodologies, and limitations of these studies will be discussed in this part to comprehend the current trends in the field of study and find out the gaps. Since there is no research on new media based film distribution in Bangladesh, research works done in related contexts will be examined here. This section offers a review of the literature on traditional film distribution, online film distribution, film distribution in Bangladesh, and impacts of new media in film distribution.

Traditional Film Distribution

In the book 'Film Art: An Introduction', Broadwell and Thompson (2008) have discussed about film distribution process, that it is done mainly by the distribution companies, whom they say form the core of the economic power in the commercial film industry. Traditional film distribution refers to the theatrical release of the films that means distribution companies make films available in different exhibiting theatres for the audience and it needs a huge amount of money for distributing films as Broadwell and Thompson provided the estimated average cost of Hollywood films for making $60 million and for distributing $35 million (p. 36). They have described the two major strategies with which distribution companies work for theatrical distribution; in platforming strategy, the film is first released in few big cities and then gradually around the whole country according to the performance of the film, and in wide release strategy, a film is released in many cities and towns and also in overseas which is a typical strategy for mainstream films; for selling or marketing the film, all the theaters are provided a short preview of the upcoming film which is called a trailer whereas music videos of the films, interviews of the stars, TV programs are done to attract the audience (p. 36). A theatre is provided a little percentage of the gross money as the authors contend that in the first week a theatre gets 10% only from the gross amount of money, again the distributor, as in the United States, takes 35% of the rentals as distribution fee and rest are for the filmmaker (pp. 34-35).

Online Film Distribution

Nowadays with the advancement of the internet, cyberspace became a new platform for film distribution which Broadwell and Thompson (2008) state as the new frontier of video distribution and this is regarded as online distribution, and it has arrived as it is possible to release any length of film online, and a huge profit can be gained where it is possible to block copying the films. Again, they add, it helped the distributors to create a system depending less on buying an object than on purchasing a service (p. 38). In the case of online distribution, here comes term VOD (video-on-demand), which is, according to Parks (2007), an element of a computerized link that enables the users to download a film to their computers and watch it instantly. YouTube is one kind of social media and VOD platform, which McMullan (2017) describes as "a
convergence medium between the Internet and TV" (p. 2). In Europe, the
online VOD market is considered the most mature with numerous platforms
competing for consumers, including Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, and
iTunes (Kehoe & Mateer, 2015).

Cunningham, Silver & McDonnell (2010) have conducted a study on the
film industry of Australia, where they have done an online search and
examined the content and business models of websites, which deliver movies
on demand through the internet. They have consulted leading trade magazines,
online business directories, expert service providers, where they used business
databases Factiva and Proquest to identify relevant articles on the industry and
on OLD (On Line Distribution) service providers. In their research, they have
discussed how OLD first came into the sector, which made a change in the film
industry and how it works as a disruptive technology in the film industry.

According to Cunningham et al. (2010), online distribution (OLD) has
emerged first in 1997 in North America with the pioneers like I-Film, Atom
Films, Intertainer, SightSound, Pop.com, CinemaNow but these companies
have been absorbed by larger companies because of failing to establish
sustainable business models (p. 121). Paramount, Universal, Warner Brothers,
20th Century Fox, Walt Disney, and Sony, six major Hollywood studios have
invested in Movielink and Movie beam in 2001 which were expected, they
state, to be the leaders of a second wave but both websites were sold in 2006
while another one was build led by Apple iTunes with Hulu, the leading
streaming site along with Netflix, Blockbuster Amazon, and some others.
Apple iTunes launched its movies on demand store in the United States;
Amazon came with its own VOD service Unbox and Netflix made available its
'Watch Instantly' streaming service to its DVD subscribers in the United States
in 2006 (Cunningham et al., p. 121). Advertiser supported site Hulu started live
streaming in March 2008 and in one year, became five times bigger than
starting time, but with 2.4 percent share of the total OLD market, Hulu was
dominated by YouTube as it had 41 percent share (Cunningham et al., p. 122).
However, the majority of the YouTube video contents did not attract
advertisers as most of the videos in the site were user-generated, and this made
YouTube facing 470 million dollars loss in 2009 (Cunningham et al., p. 122).
Hulu's advertiser-supported free viewing business model, during 2009, seemed
may not be sustainable as ad revenue of online video was estimated to be 60
percent lower than for the same program shown on network television which
led Hulu towards a subscription-plus-advertising revenue structure
(Cunningham et al., pp. 122-123).

Online distribution is becoming vital for major Hollywood Studios; as
Kozłowski (2012) states, Warner Brothers has started digitally renting movies
for the very first time on Facebook from 2011.

Film Distribution in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, there is only one association for both producers and
distributors named 'Bangladesh Film Producers and Distributors Association'
as a film producer is also the distributor here at the same time. There are
booking agents work as middlemen between the distributors and exhibitors, and they control the whole system as they decide which film will be exhibited where, which Hossain (2017) states as a ‘weird situation’ predominates in the film industry.

Kareem (2017), in his research, has explored the film distribution process and problems in Bangladesh, where he has taken interviews of eight traditional film distributors and used inductive thematic analysis to analyze the qualitative data. He stated, in most cases, the same person is the producer and distributor of a film, but in the case of different persons, a distributor is to be paid 15% of the net profit. He adds that distributors distribute the films among the exhibiting halls with the help of booking agents who are the mediators between distributors and exhibitors as they book films for the exhibiting halls but also take 10% commission of net income from the distributors. Exhibiting halls pay money in three ways, fixed rental, minimum guarantee, and percentage or share money. The method ‘percentage’ or ‘share money’, in which the distributor collects a fixed percentage of net income, is the worst one, as Khan (2017) shows that a producer gets only 20% of a ticket’s price in this method. With this, the author argues that the distribution of a film has become a hostage since exhibitors do not have technological advancement to exhibit digital films; some organizations are taking advantage by providing poor quality projection support and controlling the exhibiting halls and also because of the booking agents (p. 77).

In his research, Ahsan (2016) has taken face to face interviews of film industry professionals of Bangladesh where he stated that an organization named Jaaz Multimedia has become an intermediary force in the film industry of Bangladesh, charging money from the digital film producers to let them use the digital film projectors in the exhibiting halls. This is a threat to the film industry in the sector of distribution which Hayder (2013) states this type of tendency to control the film exhibition system can make cinema lose its own independence what happened in Canada and Australia when six big American companies had taken control over the whole distribution system in the 1970s and 1980s.

**Impacts of New Media in Film Distribution**

In their research, Kehoe & Mateer (2015) have done a situational case study on the film industry of the United Kingdom and examined two movements that are impacting the industry where new media have made changes in consumption habits, which led to the emergence of new business models. The Value Chain concept was coined by Porter in 1985, where ‘value chain’ is a framework for identifying the set of interconnected value-creating activities performed by a company in developing, manufacturing, delivering, and supporting its product and the points of connection with the activities of suppliers, channels, and customers. Digital technology affects the motion picture value chain by the new type of consumers named ‘active audiences’, which Kehoe & Mateer (2014) define as a group of consumers who have knowledge of technology, and they consume media products through the
Zhu (2001) in his research, which was done with the theoretical foundation based on the economics of digital goods and transformation of industry structure, has shown with the Figure 1, how internet-based distribution can affect picture value chain as the internet tends to disintermediate the traditional distribution agencies.

Figure 1. The Motion Picture Value Chain (Zhu, 2001, p.275)

Zhu (2001) also argues that internet-based film distribution will reduce the distribution cost, and the importance of traditional distributors will be decreased.

Kehoe & Mateer (2015) also discussed how changes in business models occur while distributing films through new media. They contended that there had been emerged multiple approaches like 'ultra VOD', 'day-and-date' releasing where 'ultra VOD' is releasing a cinema online through transactional video on demand (TVOD) a week before scheduled theatrical release which creates a sense of exclusivity and 'day-and-date' means a concurrent release in the same day on multiple distribution platforms like cinema theatres, online VODs (Netflix, others), DVDs, etc. and these seem appealing to the independent film distributors. There is advertiser supported model which enables visitors to watch movies and TV programs free whereas sales model can offer charges which are subscription sites that take rental for the determined time period; again, there is IT-innovation model where Hulu is content-driven, and iTunes is device-driven which means a consumer needs having an iPod, Apple TV or iPad or supported device which Cunningham et al. (2010) states as significant disruption to standard business models because it sells premium or near-premium content intending to make a profit from hardware device sales and to buy market share.

Ahmed (2010), in his research, has employed case studies on three Bollywood movies, which include Om Shanti Om (2007), Ghajini (2008), and Dev. D (2009) to understand how new media tools are used in their marketing strategy. He found in his research that against traditional media, the internet is
dominating the decision-making process of the viewers about the film they will watch. Nime (2012), in his Ph.D. thesis, has employed a qualitative method, and in an exploratory way, he tried to understand the impact of digital technologies upon the culture and economy of documentary distribution. He argues that online distribution means not only to make the films available to the audience but also to attach the audience in the distribution process as he states that online distribution platforms like Netflix, YouTube etc. attach consumers by including systems like rating, commenting, sharing, tagging which helps them to get more audience.

Researchers discussed about new media based film distribution around the world. However, in the perspective of Bangladesh, it is still less explored by the researchers. Ahsan (2016) has stated the problem of the rise of an intermediary force, which is trying to control the film distribution system, but his research did not provide any suggestion to come out of the problem. Kareem (2017) has outlined the traditional distribution system in Bangladesh and stated that a server-based digital distribution system has not developed in Bangladesh yet. However, there is no insight in his research about the utilization of new media in the distribution system at present.

In different researches, Kehoe & Mateer (2015), Zhu (2001), Fair (2006), Ahmed (2010), and Nime (2012) tried shortly to understand the impacts of new media based film distribution in the worldwide perspective. However, it does not seem enough, and no research is done yet to understand the affects of new media based film distribution in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

The literature review suggests that the following research questions should be explored in the present research.

RQ-1: How have the new media been utilized in film distribution in Bangladesh?
RQ-2: How will the new media affect the film distribution in Bangladesh?
RQ-3: How can an effective film distribution system be created in Bangladesh based on the new media?

Theoretical Framework

The research takes the critical political economy of communication as the theoretical base to identify the dominant economic and political factors in the utilization of new media and its affect in film distribution in Bangladesh. Mosco (2009) has defined critical political economy as "the study of social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (p. 24).

Thomas Guback in his essay 'Are We Looking at the Right Things in Film' first drew attention on the study of cinema from a political-economic approach in 1978 where he argued that film studies did not pay attention to the analysis of
cinema as an economic institution and his use of institutional approach to film
seemed more like a political-economic approach to the study of communication
(Wasko, 2004).

The relationships between media power and state power are analyzed in the
discussion of the critical political economy by identifying the owners and
controllers of media and communication resources (Wasko, 2014). In the case of
film distribution, the owners and controllers of new distribution outlets, relations
between the state and the distributors are examined by the critical political
economy. Again, media power is assessed by the discussion of class issues
(Wasko, p. 263). Critical political economists ask if online film distribution is open
for all or bound to a separate class. On the other hand, the critical political
economy of new media should be concerned with the understanding of power
structure, its evolution, and renewal (Mansell, 2004), where understanding the
domination of small capital by big capital and capturing the market by big
conglomerates are discussed. The involvement of the state in the film industry,
reproduction of power structure, uneven power distribution, and wealth, which are
represented by the industry, are also matters of interest in the critical political
economic approach (Wasko, 2004).

Drawing on the work of Murdock and Golding (2005), Mosco (2009)
discussed four cornerstones of the critical political economy: social change and
history, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis. Social change and history
refer to examining dynamic forces within capitalism to understand the change
in social relationships over time (Mosco, p. 3). Guback (1969) and Pendakur
(1990) tried to understand the film industries from historical perspectives
where Mansell (2004) finds internet as new media involving a significant
change in social and economic relations. Exploring the history of new media
based film distribution will help to understand the problems of traditional film
distribution and the circumstances which made way for the new technology in
the film distribution in Bangladesh. The growth of new media technology is
tried to understand by the analysis of policies and politics, which surrounds the
digitization process (Wasko, p. 267). In the case of film distribution where
online distribution is not bound to a specific border because of its transborder
nature, local culture is being affected by the global culture, which is also
examined by the political economists.

Social totality suggests understanding society with a holistic approach
from economic, political, social, and cultural perspectives (Mosco, p. 3). It tells
understand the connections between the political and economic (Mosco, p.
29) where with the help of government policies, privatization and liberalization
create the free market. The growth of multinational capital throughout the
world has led to the development of many new centers of media production
and has changed the direction of global and regional flows of media materials
(Bhuiyan, 2002). Big foreign conglomerates and also local companies started
online film distribution in Bangladesh, which has made a change in the media
flow where media materials like cinema are going from developing to
developed areas of the globe.
Moral philosophy means the analysis of the economic system with the discussion of normative and moral issues (Wasko, 2004) like "justice, equity, and the public good" (Mosco, 2009, p. 32). Political economists emphasize to understand if the public has access to the goods equally or those are commodified, where commodification transforms goods and services which are valued by their earning in the marketplace as communication technologies contribute to the primary commodification process in the society (Mosco, p. 11). Internet accelerates the opportunities for commodification by increasing chances to measure and monitor (Mosco, p. 12), as in the case of online film distribution, more control comes over the distribution process as the subscribers and the subscription fees are definite. Again, commodification is intensified by spatialization. Mosco (2009) described spatialization as "the process of overcoming the constraints of space in social life" (p. 14), where Harvey (1989) identifies "time-space compression" suggesting the way the world is being smaller (p. 147), as communication and information technologies promote flexibility and control throughout the industry (Mosco, p. 14) and thus encompasses the process of globalization. Praxis is referred to as free and creative activities to change the world with actions (Mosco, pp. 34-35) "to transcend the distinction between research and policy" (Wasko, p. 223).

This political-economic approach is used to understand the new media based film distribution asking the purpose of the use of new technology. It helps to ask why new media technology is used in film distribution, who benefit from this? By taking a historical approach, this research explores why and in what context internet technologies have been used in film distribution in Bangladesh with what consequences and identify its beneficiaries and losers.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research method. It utilizes in-depth interviews to collect data. As the study focuses on exploring new media based film distribution in Bangladesh and finding out the affects on traditional film distribution with a view to establishing new media based film distribution, people who are involved in film distribution both traditional and online make the population.

There is only one global video on demand (VOD) service named 'Iflix', which has just been started in Bangladesh with the support of Robi Axiata Limited, a mobile network operator in Bangladesh, a Bangladeshi online VOD service provider named BongoBD and Bioscope, another video streaming platform supported by Grameenphone, a telecommunication company (S. K Paul, personal communication, March 1, 2018). There are also some independent online distribution agencies like 'Khona Talkies', 'IndieMinds Inc.' who distribute short films of Bangladeshi filmmakers in different festivals worldwide (S. K Paul, personal communication, March 1, 2018). Again, there are 219 enlisted members of Bangladesh Film Producers and Distributors Association (BFPDA, 2018).
Interviewees are selected purposively based on their involvement with the film distribution process. Ten film distribution companies are taken as the sample. Among them, six are traditional film distribution companies randomly selected from the 219 members of Bangladesh Film Producers and Distributors Association, and four are online distribution companies. In-depth interviews of the ten respondents of the following ten distribution companies are taken to collect detailed information. Among them, four respondents of four online distribution companies are interviewed to understand the present situation of new media based film distribution in Bangladesh, and six respondents of six traditional distribution companies are interviewed to find out the impacts of new media based film distribution on traditional film distribution. All ten respondents are interviewed to get suggestions for creating an effective film distribution system. All the questions were open-ended, and the respondents were encouraged to answer in detail. Follow up questions were asked based on the reply of the respondents.

Table 1. Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Name of the Company</th>
<th>Name of the Respondent</th>
<th>Designation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Film Distributors</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>BongoBD</td>
<td>Mushfiqur Rahman</td>
<td>Director, Content Acquisitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Iflix</td>
<td>Sheikh Rifat Islam</td>
<td>Head of Marketing, Bangladesh &amp; Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Film</td>
<td>IndieMinds Inc.</td>
<td>Shubh Kumar Paul</td>
<td>Distributor and owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Film</td>
<td>Khona Talkies</td>
<td>Aung Rakhine</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Traditional Film Distributors</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Ashirbad Chalachitra</td>
<td>Razib Ahsan</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Janani Kothachitra</td>
<td>Sajjad Hossain</td>
<td>Distributor and Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Jazz Multimedia</td>
<td>Abdul Aziz</td>
<td>Chairman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Tushar Kathachitra</td>
<td>Abdul Mabud Kawsar</td>
<td>Distributor and Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Malancha Chalachitra</td>
<td>Miah Alauddin</td>
<td>Distributor and Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature Film</td>
<td>Modhumita Movies</td>
<td>Iftekhar Uddin Nowshad</td>
<td>Distributor and Owner</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Consents of the respondents were taken for recording the interview. A voice recorder was used to record the interviews of the respondents. After that, the interviews are transcribed verbatim. The inductive thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the in-depth interviews. Transcribed interviews are coded.
and divided into thirteen themes under the three research questions. According to the themes and, the data are analyzed.

**Results**

Online film distribution is a developing sector in Bangladesh. It has not become a primary distribution medium yet but being developed as a secondary distribution outlet. There are two types of online distribution platforms in Bangladesh, feature film distribution and festival distribution.

**New Media Distribution Process**

In Bangladesh, three companies release feature films online, and two companies distribute short and feature films in international film festivals through the internet. Different companies employ different strategies for doing the distribution. Bongo is a Bangladeshi originated emerging multinational video on demand streaming site, which is presently streaming in five South Asian countries; India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. It is planning to start streaming in more 31 countries targeting Bangladeshi and native audience living in those countries. In Bangladesh, Bong is streaming with the name BongoBD. For starting streaming videos, Bongo applied for a publishing license to the organization MCN (Multi Channel Network), which provides support to the online video streaming sites. Getting the license, it became authorized for starting the streaming site. BongoBD started buying online distribution rights of different video contents as well as films from the owners based on two processes, royalty and onetime payment. BongoBD is different here from other streaming sites as it takes the whole distribution right, which allows it to release the content not only on BongoBD but also on other platforms. To protect the contents by copyright, BongoBD created a YouTube channel where the content management panel (CMS) provided by MCN allowed it to block the same video contents uploaded on other YouTube channels that are owned by BongoBD. It uploaded all the video contents on the YouTube channel but kept in private to create the demand with a view to starting a subscription-based platform. It wanted to create more demand by keeping the video contents in private mode for a long time but could not continue as some other companies started buying online rights of different video contents, and they published those on their YouTube channels, which created the pressure on BongoBD to publish the video contents. But to start subscription-based streaming service, it faced a problem in case of payment method because there is no common payment gateway in Bangladesh for the subscribers as very few people use credit cards. By this time, Grameenphone started Bioscop— a video on demand streaming service, and BongoBD linked up with it by providing content and logistic support. Bioscope is now providing free service and later will go for the subscription model and enter into the global market. Bioscope streams the latest feature films along with other video
contents like music video, lifestyle content, drama, live television channels etc. BongoBd will support Bioscope for a certain period. It is being prepared by collecting video content for a big startup as it already has 1000 feature films and lots of other content. It wants to start as a leading VOD streaming service of Bangladesh using Grameenphone as the payment gateway. BongoBd wants to be streaming sites like Amazon, Netflix, and plans to stream BongoBD Originals, which means it will produce content by itself for the streaming site.

Iflix, a Malaysian originated multinational streaming site started its journey in Bangladesh recently which works focusing on emerging economic countries where Netflix is not prominent yet as the respondent says,

"Iflix is present in South Asian emerging markets like Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines apart from big markets like India where Netflix has huge investment..." (S.R. Islam, personal communication, May 8, 2018)

Iflix releases the latest Bangladeshi feature films after the theatre release. In a very short time, Bangladesh became the fourth most important country for Iflix placing after the top three countries, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. It is started as the video platform of the telecommunication company Robi Axiata Limited as every telecommunication company seems nowadays trying to provide a value-added service like video platform. On the other hand, Iflix became connected with Axiata with a deal of working in the countries where Axiata is providing telecommunication service as it will work as the payment gateway for the subscribers as Grameenphone will work for BongoBD. Robi is privileged here in the way that Robi users will be able to watch Iflix contents at a lower price than other telecom service users as Robi is able to design their data package linking Iflix. Unlike Bongo, Iflix buys only the online rights for releasing in Iflix. In the case of feature films, Iflix buys the online rights to release the films on its site after the theatre release. Iflix releases Iflix Originals in other countries and now also planning to produce Iflix Originals in Bangladesh. It is planning to have two systems free tier and premium tier for earning revenue where the free tire will be advertiser-supported, and premium tier will be subscription fee-based. Content owners will be paid with the off-the-shelf (OTS) model where they will get a specific amount of money for per hour view of the distinct amount of content. For example, in the case of royalty, if someone provides 20 films to Iflix, 50% of the revenues from per hour view of the 20 films will be provided to the owner.

Khona Talkies and Indi Minds distribute short and feature films in different international film festivals. Khona Talkies also tries to distribute films in cinema theatres after festival distribution and later in online platforms. It mainly focuses on alternative cinemas which are not well celebrated in cinema theatres. With this, it encourages promising film directors of the country making a demand of the Bangladeshi films in the festival-oriented markets of the world. Indi Minds also distributes films in the festivals and helps filmmakers making them aware of the rules and regulations of participating in international film festivals.
Reasons Behind the Emergence of Online Film Distribution

Due to the evolution of technology, things around the world became digitalized, and in foreign countries, online distribution has been started earlier. Four reasons are vital behind the emergence of online-based film distribution in Bangladesh. Firstly, the business of CD and DVD has been destroyed by the rise of piracy in 2006-2007 as video contents were copied from DVD and uploaded in online sites as the respondent says,

"In the mid-2000s which are in 2006 and 2007, it is found that the business of CD-DVD is not that profitable as the contents became available to all because of piracy" (M. Rahman, personal communication, May 8, 2018)

As a result, a massive demand for video content has emerged in Bangladesh, but there was no streaming site at all. In that situation, the running streaming sites have been started with a view to capturing the market.

Secondly, cinema theatres have been decreased from around 1200 (Hayder, 2012) to 321 (Roy, 2016) in the last decade. The environment of the running theatres is not well enough for all kinds of audiences. On the other hand, the contents of the cinemas in the last decade did not satisfy the audience, which made them averse to cinema theatres. But they were still interested in cinemas and were searching a way to watch films without going theatres. Again, in the case of big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, a huge time of the audience is consumed due to traffic jams to reach the theatres. These situations amplified the need for VOD streaming services which attracted the online distributors.

Thirdly, there were audiences for Bangladeshi contents in different countries of the world, especially the people working in different foreign countries who want to watch Bangladeshi contents. That was also one of the reasons behind starting multinational VOD streaming platforms.

Fourthly, an online film distributor needs to spend a minimal amount of money to distribute the film as it is just about uploading the film on the website. On the other hand, the profit is a slow process but not limited as the onetime profit from the theatres. For example, a standard film made with one crore taka, can income 80 lakhs from the theatres, 20 lakhs from television rights and 20 lakhs from online rights, but in case of royalty, the income from online rights may be increased from 20 lakhs according to the number of hours viewed. This made the content makers interested in online distribution.

Moreover, different companies that emerged to distribute films in film festivals have three reasons. Firstly, independent cinema is not so popular in Bangladesh as those cannot gather much audience attention because of the difference in content and presentation than the mainstream films what is said by the distributor that,

"Most of the audiences in Bangladesh are not yet ready to watch these kinds of films" (A. Rakhine, personal communication, May 12, 2018)
As a result, these independent cinemas are not welcomed by traditional distributors for theatre release. For example, *The Unnamed* (2016), *Kingdom of Clay Subjects* (2016), *Halda* (2017), all these films were released in a very few theatres because of being alternative in types though these were critically acclaimed. So, production and distribution organizations like Khona Talkies came forward to help in making and distributing these kinds of films in different foreign film festivals through online where these are screened and critiqued.

Secondly, submitting films in foreign festivals is quite difficult, which is true for both feature and short films. Film submission needs to go through a complicated process as it requires many formalities with a massive paperwork and a great experience. Some festivals want to see still pictures of the shooting time, which is called working stills. Again, it needs to write a 'logline' for the film, which means describing the whole film in only one line. In some cases, film festivals demand a press release or press kit about the film. But in most of the cases, the filmmakers are not familiar with these formalities, which led companies like Khona Talkies, Indi Minds come forward to doing the job as festival distributors.

Thirdly, in the case of Indi Minds, it came in festival distribution with a plan to be renowned as a festival distributor, which is vital for the career of the distributor in many ways. Distributing some good films makes a good track record for the distributor, which develops the reputation of a distributor. For submitting films, there needs some fees; this reputation with a good track record enables the distributor to get a certain percentage of discount, in some cases, no fees. Again, very few festivals invite short filmmakers in the festival with all the supports, including air ticket, lodging, food expenses etc. but a reputed distributor can manage all these supports for the director. Moreover, the distributor of Indi Minds distributes short films, and through this, he is developing the worldwide network with other distributors with a view to establishing a platform for short films in Bangladesh like the television channel ShortsTV in America.

**Challenges to the Online Film Distribution**

Distributors face different kinds of problems, as online film distribution is a developing sector in Bangladesh. Firstly, most of the content makers are not interested in online distribution as they do not understand the way it works. Some relate it to piracy. Secondly, some content makers are not aware of copyright. Sometimes they use copyrighted music as background score. As a result, the content becomes blocked with the claim of the actual owner when uploaded on the site. So, distributors have to work hard to know the credibility of the content, but it is not that easy as they are not well equipped yet to detect the copyrighted items in the contents before uploading. Thirdly, internet speed and costs are also vital concerns for online distributors. Less internet speed costs more money if anyone wants to watch a film with a mobile phone using telecommunication service as a payment gateway. For example, it consumes
around one gigabyte of data to watch a film that costs at least 15-20 taka, and this is a little high for the audience of Bangladesh. Fourthly, festival distributors face problems when they find films to be distributed, which do not meet the festival requirements as filmmakers are not aware of different kinds of requirements of the festivals.

The telecommunication companies mostly occupy the emerging new media based film distribution sector in Bangladesh, as most of the streaming sites have been started as value-added services of different telecommunication companies. As the sector is just growing up, it is facing different kinds of problems in the present time.

The Consequence of Online Film Distribution

As online film distribution is a new concept in Bangladesh, some traditional distributors are not yet familiar with the process. They are confused with the new type of film distribution and think that the consequences of online film distribution will be understood by the way the process will ensure the recovery of the capital spent in making the film. There are different opinions among the distributors about the consequences of online film distribution.

Some think online distribution will affect traditional film distribution by decreasing the audience of the cinema theatres. Because, if films are found to watch online, people will lose their interest in going to the theatres. As a result, the number of exhibiting halls will be decreased, and theatre release thus will be affected.

Most of the traditional distributors hardly feel any challenge because of online distribution. They argue that online distribution is still a developing medium in Bangladesh. Only a few movies have been released online after the theatre release. It has not yet become the primary platform for distribution. Here, it is almost secondary, sometimes tertiary platform as people still like to watch films in theatres and will always like to, if it is possible to provide a better environment in the theatres.

Again, they believe that online distribution will strengthen the film distribution system. Because the revenue is unlimited here as it depends on the volume of watch hours by the audience. Additionally, online film distribution will reduce the cost of distribution, removing the intermediaries of the traditional film distribution process. Because there will be no need for the middlemen like booking agents and exhibitors as the film will reach the audience directly from the distributor to the audience through the internet.

Suggestions for Developing an Effective Film Distribution System

Distributors suggested taking different steps for creating an effective film distribution system based on new media. But they reminded that, it is not possible to create an effective film distribution system based only on new media. There needs the coordination of the traditional and the online
distribution as traditional distribution is still the primary distribution medium in Bangladesh.

To raise the interest of the content makers in online distribution, it needs to make them understand about the online distribution process. To provide online distribution rights to the distributors, some content makers believe in revenue sharing, and some are interested in the onetime payment method. It needs to explain the revenue sharing method to them in a believable way. Again, content makers are needed to make aware of copyright claims by doing different kinds of workshops and training. With this, there needs proper logistic support to detect the copyrighted items in the contents before uploading those on the online platforms. Moreover, the internet cost needs to be reduced, and high-speed internet should be ensured to push up the audience's interest in watching films online. On the other hand, festival distributors need to make filmmakers informed about different types of requirements for the festival submissions.

Making Good Films

To distribute films online, at first it needs to make good films which will attract the audience. For good films, there need good artists. On the other hand, films should be made abiding the content making policy of online platforms like using original or copyright-free sound and music scores. Online streaming companies should have eye-catching websites, which are needed in a global perspective to attract both global and local audiences.

Coordination of Online and Traditional Distribution Process

Distributors think that it is impossible to create an effective film distribution system based on only the new media. There needs the coordination of traditional and online distribution process, and for the coordination, it needs emphasizing on the theatre distribution first. Exhibiting halls should be made attractive and comfortable for all kinds of audiences by upgrading the environment. Theatres should be air-conditioned, sitting chairs should be comfortable, screening quality, the sound system should be up to the mark. There needs to have a food court and other luxuries for the audience to provide complete entertainment. Again, the number of theatres should be increased. Moreover, theatres can take a strategy initiated by the American company named MoviePass, founded in 2011, which is called 'Netflix for Theatres', allowing a subscriber to buy a movie ticket every day with a plane subscription fee for the whole month (Hardawar, 2012).

There should be a chain for film distribution that means, at first, the film will be released in theatres, then, after a specific period of time, in online platforms with pay per view mode or subscription mode and at last, in television channels. With this planned distribution, revenues will come from different platforms. For this type of coordination, there needs efficient and robust leadership, and all these could be implemented successfully if it is possible to obstruct piracy by having the proper equipment to detect the guilty one and law enforcement power to punish that one.
Online film distributors also suggested that the film production companies should develop their own online platforms like most of the Indian sites as Eros Now, Hungama, Jio Cinema etc. where all the films produced by one company will be available online after a certain period of theatre release, and the audience will be able to watch those films any time paying a subscription fee.

**Working at the Policy Level**

There needs to work at the policy level for establishing an effective distribution system. Here also needs the coordination of policies for online and traditional distribution. Online content making policy should be fixed based on Bangladeshi social values and cultural norms. For example, BongoBD uploaded a music video *Nesha* sung and performed by Kushum Shikder on its YouTube channel, which was accepted by YouTube authority as that does not employ any conflicting item with YouTube’s content policy. However, after releasing the video, a Supreme Court lawyer filed a legal notice to remove the video song from all social media outlets accusing it under section eight of the Pornography Act 2012. So, the universal policy may not be applicable in Bangladesh.

Distribution of revenues in online distribution and pricing of the tickets in traditional distribution should be determined by the government. Real box office information should be available online, which will help the producer to understand how the audience is responding to his film and that will help to improve the quality of the content.

A policy should be employed to improve the environment of the cinema theatres. For example, if anyone wants to import chairs for replacing the old chairs of the cinema theatre, he has to pay 37.07% tax (BCNBR, 2018). Distributors suggest reducing the tax rates on importing theatre materials like the projector, chair, air cooler, sound equipment for a certain period of time, which will encourage the theatre owners to renovate the theatres.

The Producers and Distributors Association should be separated. In the present time, a producer does not feel pressure to produce good films as the same person is the distributor here. But separate distributor's association will help to pressurize producers for making good films. On the other hand, The Producers and Distributors Association does not have any executive committee. As a result, there are no spokespersons to talk about the problems and policy development in the production and distribution sector. This gave rise to the booking agents as an intermediary force in the distribution system. A real example of the necessity of the executive committee is that, when Jaaz Multimedia set digital projectors in some theatres, it demanded that the distributor will provide the rent for the projectors. But it is always the exhibitor who is supposed to make arrangements for the projection, not the distributor. As a result, a distributor has to spend extra money on the projectors till now, and no one is there to raise a voice about it. There needs separate executive committees for the separate associations of the producers and the distributors to get rid of the problems.
Discussion

There are some key factors behind the emergence of new media in film distribution in Bangladesh. The rise of piracy, the decreasing number of cinema theatres, the arrival of new technology etc. caused a change in the distribution pattern, which can be understood from the critical political economic perspective.

Piracy made the gatekeepers around the world to think about a new form of distribution, which is called online distribution started first in 1997 in North America (Cunningham et al., 2010) but in Bangladesh, it has been started 15 years later by Bongo in 2012. Again, Fair (2006) stated that digital technology is considered to have accelerated piracy as it is easier to make clones with very little loss of quality. But in Bangladesh, piracy of CD and DVD made the gatekeepers to welcome new media in film distribution, but they did not yet face the problem of piracy in case of online contents as it is just an emerging sector and distribution sites have not yet started making their own contents which could be pirated.

On the other hand, the number of theatres has been started to be decreased as it was counted 321 in 2016 (Roy, 2016), which was 1200 in 2005 (Hayder, 2012). A key reason behind it was the scarcity of good content, which was led by the internal problems of the distribution system in the last part of the 20th century. In this system, there is an association for the distributors, which is also the association for the producers, as it named Film Producers and Distributors Association. Again, in the present time, the association is under a government administrator as there is no elected executive committee. This kind of weak policy, which can be understood with the third basic characteristic of the critical political economy, created havoc not only in the distribution sector but also in the whole film industry. Because when the distributor and producer are the same, there is no compulsion for the producer to create good films as he can distribute any film he wants.

On the other hand, distributors cannot take part in policy-making, as there is no executive committee. Because of not having any spokesperson to deal with the state about different kinds of policies, the decision-making power is secured only by the state. Taking the chance, booking agents grew up as an intermediary force determining the fate of a film as they do not hire films for the theatres based on good content but star casting, glamour etc. which Khan (2017) states, film distribution became hostage to the booking agents. As a result, theatres lost audience attention and the business became a fact of financial loss for the owners, which led them to close the theatres. Again, the environment and the service of the still running theatres have been started deteriorating, which will lead those to be closed in the near future.

To keep pace with the new generation and to come out of all the problems, platforms like BongoBD, Bioscope, Iflix have started distributing films online, but this type of distribution has not yet become significant as it is just an emerging sector in Bangladesh.

Online film distribution involves a significant change in social and economic relations according to Mansell (2004), where power relations can be analyzed by identifying the owners and controllers of online distribution outlets (Wasko, 2014).
In Bangladesh, online distribution sites like Bioscope and Iflix are streaming as video platforms of telecommunication companies like Grameenphone of Telenor, a Norwegian multinational telecommunications company, and Robi Axiata Limited of Axiata Group, a Malaysian telecommunications company. Bioscope is run by BongoBD, which is the only Bangladeshi emerging multinational subscription-based VOD service provider. BongoBD is now focusing on upgrading Bioscope as it uses Grameenphone as a payment gateway. Iflix is a subscription-based Malaysian VOD service, which is also attached to Robi Axiata Limited to have it as a payment gateway. So, there are two types of controllers of the leading online film distribution companies of Bangladesh; telecommunications companies and multinational foreign and native VOD service provider companies. In the case of Iflix and BongoBD, owners are multinational companies, and in the case of Bioscope, the owner is a telecommunications company. However, in every case, there is related a telecommunications company as distribution companies need them to use as payment gateways and also the telecommunications companies are trying to have control over the online distribution which Mahbub (2016) indicates about a silent war which is going on among the major telecom operators in Bangladesh for having the control of digital service space. As foreign multinational companies are mostly investing in the sector, global capital is absorbing local market here. On the other side, BongoBD, the only Bangladeshi online platform is also targeting global market as Ahsan (2012) argues that there are active audiences for Bangladeshi films in the different parts of the world where the active audience is defined by Kehoe & Mateer (2014) as the "emergence of a new group of technology-savvy consumers who primarily consume media product via the Internet" (p. 99). Here, local capital like is entering into a foreign market changing the direction of the flow of media materials as Bhuiyan (2002) states about the expansion of multinational capital which has altered the direction of global and regional flows of media materials.

On the other hand, festival distributors, Khona Talkies, and Indi Minds are basically owned and controlled by independent filmmakers. In the beginning, they started this type of distribution for participating in different film festivals with their own films, and later transformed into business platforms.

Wasco (2014) emphasizes on the assessment of media power by the discussion of class issues. Online can become a powerful medium of film distribution, but it is limited to the people of an economic class who can buy a device like a smartphone, tablet or personal computer and have access to the high-speed internet where most of the people in Bangladesh do not have access to the internet with a minimum speed (BTRC, 2019). This is an image of inequality because most of the people in Bangladesh are not able to access the internet. Again, inequality is found in the legislation as there is no specific policy for VOD services, but traditional films have to pass through the sensor for being released. A policy vacuum for which traditional distribution is in the discriminative environment, suggests establishing a suitable policy for online film distribution.

The rise of the internet has advanced the opportunities for commodification where the commodification of goods and services means transforming them into commodities which are valued for their earning in the marketplace (Mosco, 2009).
Online distribution has commodified films as it made films reaching directly to the audience, providing them the opportunity to watch in their suitable time but in exchange for the money taken as a subscription fee. This kind of flexible business promoted by new media technology is significant as it is changing the model of earning revenue.

Spatialization, which means "the process of overcoming the constraints of space in social life" (Mosco, p. 14) encompasses the process of globalization which is identified by Harvey (1989) as "time-space compression", suggesting the way the world is being smaller (p. 149). Because of online film distribution, the audience need not going to the theatres, which consumes much time in big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong due to the excessive traffic jam. Again, the audiences from different parts of the world are being able to watch Bangladeshi films. Mosco (2009) argues digital technology's contribution in changing the structure of existing companies (p. 15), which is found by the intention of traditional distributors to start online distribution as a part of the whole distribution process, which will change the structure of traditional distribution companies. Pendakur (1990) perceives film as the commodity by describing the film as "tangible product and intangible service" (p. 39), where online distribution provides the streaming service, which makes films more intangible than in the theatres.

Mosco (2009) describes social totality as understanding the society with a holistic approach from economic, political, social, and cultural perspectives (p. 3) and especially the connections between the political and economic (p. 29). Traditional distribution and online distribution generate different social cultures. People go to watch cinema in theatres in their leisure time, maybe with family and friends, take food, do shopping etc. It becomes an avenue to get together, which strengthens the social bond. However, online film distribution encourages an individualistic culture where one can watch any film he wishes in his free time. It works to loosen the social bond.

On the other hand, in the case of theatre distribution, earned money is distributed among several groups of people like the producer, distributor, booking agent, exhibitor. But online distribution is run by sharing revenue between the content provider and the distributor which Zhu (2001) shows in his research that the distribution cost is reduced with the disintermediation in the motion picture value chain. Again, privatization and liberalization of telecommunication services have created the opportunity for free market by providing the telecommunication companies the chance to create online distribution platforms as most of the OLD platforms in Bangladesh are owned and controlled by the telecommunication companies.

A critical situation is prevailing in the distribution sector of the Bangladesh Film Industry. Distributors are economically endangered, and online distribution is perceived by them as a gateway to earn some additional revenue which led them taking it positively as they suggested the coordination of traditional and new media based film distribution process which Mosco (2009) states about the flexible companies those make change in the relationships with other companies by using communication and information systems like internet (p. 15).
Conclusion

This research tried to explore the present situation of new media based film distribution in Bangladesh. It tried to see how it affected the traditional film distribution system and develop a framework for an effective distribution system. This research was conducted based on in-depth interviews of people involved in the traditional distribution system and new media-based distribution.

Online film distribution is a growing sector in Bangladesh. Piracy, decreasing number of cinema theatres, increasing the demand of Bangladeshi contents in different areas of the world, less expense in online distribution, making alternative cinemas, and urges to participate in different film festivals around the world made distributors using internet technologies in film distribution. At present, the sector is controlled by telecommunications companies. Most of the sites are started as value-added services of the mobile network operators with a view to creating video streaming platforms and controlling the digital service space in Bangladesh. Even though some take the online distribution as a threat to theatrical distribution, the greater part of the traditional film distributors perceives online distribution as supportive to the film distribution system as it diminishes the cost of film distribution by disintermediating booking agents and exhibitors from the distribution process and increases revenue. There needs the coordination of traditional and online film distribution to create an effective film distribution system, where making good films and working at the policy level are essential.

Limitations

It was challenging to find out the affects of new media in film distribution, as most of the traditional distributors had a hard time expressing their thoughts. Additionally, only ten distributors are interviewed for the research. It would be better to interview more traditional and online film distributors. Again, some YouTube based distributors could be vital as respondents for the research, but it was not possible to interview them as they were unavailable during the data collection phase. Moreover, the research has not included audience perception about the new media-based film-watching platforms. If the opinion of the audience could be analyzed, it would be more comprehensive. On the other hand, the research did not include the marketing strategy of online film distribution, which seems needed for a better understanding of the sector. The absence of previous studies in this sector in Bangladesh also made this research very challenging.

Future Areas of Research

Future researchers can study the following aspects.

First, the researchers can assess the audience perception of online media as a cinema watching platform in Bangladesh.
Second, research can be done on the marketing strategies of online distributors to understand the changing trends of film marketing in the era of new media.

Finally, a comprehensive study on the whole film distribution system of Bangladesh can be done to understand the roles of stakeholders in developing an effective film distribution system.

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References


