



## Forest in crisis: 2 decades of media discourse analysis of Bangladesh print media<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Forest conservation is a major challenge in Bangladesh. It is believed that mass media is a powerful channel in political communication of different political actors in communicating their perception on certain issues. Forest discourses are not limited to the scientific and political sphere but also a popular topic for mass media in Bangladesh. In this study, media discourses from 1989 to 2009 from the “The Daily Ittefaq” of Bangladesh are analyzed. A quantitative–qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles on forest topics was the chosen methodology. The forest discourses in the Bangladeshi print media from 1989 to 2009 was built around the crisis argumentation i.e. the forest of Bangladesh is in a crisis. Deforestation and wildlife conservation dominated the Bangladesh forest media discourse where genuine events like illegal logging, forest destruction, wildlife poaching and wildlife human conflicts were most prominent issues discussed in the mass media of Bangladesh. Journalists were the prominent speaker in the print media and primarily shaped the discussion around the problems of the Bangladeshi forest sector. This study finds that the presence of center political actors like politicians and administration do not have much media standing in forest discourse. Therefore they have limited influence or interest in the formulation of forest discourse in the Bangladeshi print media. On the contrary the peripheral actors enjoyed dominant standing in the Bangladeshi print media discourse and thus influence the forest discourses in the print media.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is one of the central necessities of human society, as exchange of information is essential in modern day society. Various interest groups try to understand each other's position, opinion or stand point on different aspects through communicative action. In natural resources policy field like forest policy, this communicative action is very important as both the public and private stakeholders communicate to achieve their interest in policy negotiation (Krott, 2005). In democratic society, the boundary between public and private dichotomy is seen as the distinction between state administration and market economy (Sikor, 2008). From this notion of public, Bangladeshi forest policy is dominated by the public stakeholders in the form of government –that includes the elected representative and the forest administration. According to the concept of governance, where both the governmental actors and civil society actors take part in the governing processes, legitimization of policy decision is imperative. The

legitimization of the governmental actor's action may come from the elections in a democratic society, while the others legitimize their discussions through rational discourse lead by the best argument. This argument leads towards the importance of a public sphere where the center actors like governmental speakers (politicians and administration) consider the general people as the informed citizen, who will vote for the representatives and legitimize their decisions. On the other hand, the peripheral actors like civil society needs the public to create an open and rational discourse in accordance with their view and interest regarding the forest policy issues (Kleinschmit and Krott, 2008). Within the political process e.g. forest policies, mass media is known to assist with the aggregation of interests, to provide a channel for communication, and to facilitate the revision of shared aims and policies (Curran, 2002). Building on these functions of the media, the media discourse can provide a platform for deliberations (Kleinschmit, 2012) and in this way offer an opportunity to legitimize the governance of natural resources (Steffek, 2009). Assuming this role of media, the media discourses in nationally published print media provide the national public opinion (Kingdon, 2003) which may influence the policy decision making. Particularly taking the concept of public sphere which is mostly now provided by the media (Kleinschmit, 2012). Different media like “new media” and “old media” have their own strengths and weaknesses. The “new media”

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like internet blogs and social network sites has its strength in having the open interactive discursive spaces for multi stakeholder, however media's gatekeeper role is absent here and hence a channelized aggregation of information is absent in the "new media" (O'sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2005). The "old media" like newspapers, television or radio are strong in aggregating and channelizing information. For this reason these media types are still more preferred by the opinion leaders and political decision makers while searching for indicators of public opinion on certain issues (Kleinschmit and Krott, 2008). Considering this particular role of "old media" this paper will concentrate on newspaper reporting to find out the Bangladeshi forest discourses from 1989 to 2009 and will pose the general research question; how the media discourses on forest issues are shaped in the Bangladeshi print media? Based on the relevant media theory the following chapter will specify the research question into two hypotheses for guiding the empirical media analysis.

## 2. Theoretical frame work

In politics communication plays a very important role. In one sense politics is communication i.e. sending, receiving and processing of politically relevant or significant messages (Chaffe, 1975). According to the theory of deliberative democracy, for this political communication a public sphere is imperative in modern democratic society. According to Habermas (1998) a public sphere cannot be perceived as an institution or organization or system rather it is a communicative network of information and points of views, where topic or issue specific public opinions are formed after processing and synthesis of communication (Habermas, 1998; Park, 2009). Discourse is a social construction of reality which is a kind of knowledge (Fairclough, 1995; Dijk, 1985). It is a general understanding of "discussion", "speech" or "argument". These processed communications are generally aggregated as discourse. Discourse analysis is a potent way of public policy analysis used by the policy scientist. Similarly discourse has been a prominent term in the forest policy science (Leipold, 2014). With the popularity of discourse analysis in forest policy science scholars are successfully using discourse analysis in explaining constructivist approach in political ecology (Winkel, 2012) and new modes of governance (Kleinschmit et al. 2009a) in the forestry and environment sector. The recent study on natural resources policy and public deliberation confirms that media is a provider of public sphere where aggregation of stakeholders' opinion, interest, and viewpoint are found (Kleinschmit, 2012). According to Kingdon (2003), mass media definitely has an influence on building the public opinion agenda around certain issues. The mass media always keeps track on the governmental decision and response to certain issues and also the public's reaction to those particular response/decision/issues (Miller et al., 1979). So media discourses are important indicators of public opinion. Keller (1997) approached media discourse as a thematically specific content of text production, which comprises of public discussions on a certain political and/or environmental issues, delivered via media where conversation between relevant actors occurred (Keller, 1997). Additionally, Michel Foucault explains discourse from a power perspective, and elaborates how certain discourses are formed and why a certain actor participates in a particular discourse (Park, 2009). Hence, this study perceives forest media discourse as the communication about topics and actors present in the print media that are relevant to forest issues.

The development of public sphere in the subcontinent has a long history. It was first flourished during the independence struggle against the British colonial power. After the end of British colonial occupation, Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan. With the death of the Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the state of Pakistan went through long military dictatorship and the development of the public sphere was halted. Although with the beginning of East Pakistan's movement for democracy and autonomy, the rebirth of the public sphere was occurred, this was though subject to the military dictatorship's suppression. Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the development of public sphere was relatively

slow. The decision of single party ruling for Bangladesh from the multi-party democracy in 1974 has again disrupted the development of public sphere and freedom of media. This continues even after the Bangladesh's return to multi-party democracy as the country was ruled by military regimes for another decade. Following the democratic transition in 1991, the public sphere flourished again in Bangladesh and subsequently the presence of a civil society in the public debate on different aspects of governing and governance in the media became more prominent (Ahmed, 2009). Like other international and national print media, the Bangladeshi print media is also very much influenced by the corporate nature and political ideology of the owners along with the aspiration and characteristics of that certain media's audience i.e. readership. The Bangladesh print media is given credit for influencing environmental policy changes like the removal of the two stroke auto-rickshaw and polythene bags to reduce environmental pollutions (Anam, 2002). As like other print media in the world, Bangladesh print media is also selective in processing of news. So the selective function of newspapers, decides which information becomes news and which not, following specific rules (Kleinschmit, 2012). Both central and peripheral political actors know about these rules and adapt to these rules when competing for media attention. In this way the reported reality is already a constructed reality, adapted to the media rules. Assuming this role of media, the media discourses in nationally published print media provide the national public opinion and the aggregation of interest positions of the central and peripheral actors on forest issues (Kingdon, 2003), which, may in turn influence the policy decision making (Liu et al., 2008). These selection criteria are commonly understood as the news worthiness of certain issues or events. Media articles are most often based on particular activities or events. Kepplinger (1992) classified these events into three types based on their nature; genuine, mediatized and staged events. *Genuine events* are completely independent of media attention i.e. without anyone's attention, the event will happen. A good example of genuine event is an earth quake. Most of these genuine events concerned with the society and forest appear in the media. *Mediatized events* are those incidences, which would happen without press coverage but those events have a media interest, for example the publishing of national forestry report or forest policy by the forest administration. The *staged events* are the incidents those are created to attract press coverage i.e. creation of events by an interest group to get the media coverage to reach out. Demonstration against deforestation and poaching could be examples of staged events (Park, 2009). In addition, other news factors like; valance, nearness, controversy, success story and personification also play vital roles in news reporting in the media (Park, 2009). As it is mentioned before that print media have also a role in the policy process as it provides the platform for political actors to argue their ideas thoughts and policy solutions to influence the public opinion. The political impact of opinion in the media have an indirect role in policy decision making, as it might influence the reelection of the politicians in future. The public opinion in the media also have an impact on the reputations of other civil society actors. Hence, different political actors, both public and private attempt to have a significant presence in the media as a speaker to propagate their own interest and highlight certain forest issues which has better chances for becoming a media article (Krott, 2005). In the case of forest, the crisis events have more chance to be presented in the media in comparison to others, as it happened in the case of acid rain problems in UK. While creating or forming the discourses on forest issues, the actors have a tendency to use crisis argument, event and particular problem issue, as it was observed for the forest dieback issues in Germany during 1980s (Glück, 1986; Krott, 1987). This phenomenon has called by Prittzwitz (1990) as 'paradox of disaster'. Therefore this study poses the first hypothesis as "*forest discourses in the Bangladesh print media are formed around forest and nature in crisis argumentation.*"

Studying forest discourses in the context of forest policy science is not complete unless proper consideration has been given to the political actors (both center and peripheral), who shape the forest discourses in the media. In this study we understand different policy actors/

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