

Television Talk Shows in Bangladesh: Public sphere challenges

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Abstract

Television talk shows are very popular in Bangladesh. People want to know descriptively what is happening at home and abroad. On television talk shows, experienced and well known guests analyse contemporary issues and events. These kind of programs can be a public platform where everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in a debate by which democratic decisions are reached. Through creating this kind of public opportunity, television talk shows can create awareness among the country's common people on different political, social, and economic issues. It also plays an important role in drawing attention of the government and policy makers to their activities. In this study, the researcher has used content analysis and survey methods with research tools like in-depth interview for data collection. Two television talk shows like "Tritiyo Matra" of Channel i television and "Ekattor Journal" of Ekushey television. The two talk shows were selected from November 25, 2014 to January 05, 2015. During this time, Bangladesh experienced a turbulent political situation between the two major political parties. If the talk shows of Bangladeshi television channels play a vital role then one can guess what is going on throughout the country. In this study, the researcher has found that television talk shows are mostly elite centric, male centric and city centric. There is a little public participation in the talk shows. Discussions of talk shows are ill informed and polarised to the political parties, with a few exceptions. Politicians, business people and other decision makers decide what the issues and discussions are.

Keywords: Television, Talk Show, Public Sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a democratic country in South Asia having 160 million people with \$1,466 per capita income. Bangladesh is identified as a next 11th economy in the world. According to Human Resource Development Report, Bangladesh has a major achieved significant progress in human development, gender equity and women empowerment, universal primary education, reducing population growth, food production, and health. At the same time, the country is facing lot of problems too. Political instability is another big problem in Bangladesh. More than thousands of lives were lost in the last two years in political clashes. In such a critical and disheveled situation of the country, media, especially television talk shows can play a vital role and create a public space, where masses can express their opinion and discuss about important issues of the state. They can discuss about corruption and political instability related issues and how to overcome these situations. Without mass media, openness and accountability are impossible in contemporary democracies. Mass media can help people to understand the operations of government, participate in political decisions, and hold government officials accountable (Balkin, 1998).

Currently, television is the most popular mass media in Bangladesh. According to AC Nielsen National Media and Demographic Survey (2011), 74 percent of the population has access to TV. It has a large audience compared to other traditional media like newspaper, magazine and radio. People want to know descriptively what is going on at home and abroad. In the talk shows, experienced and well known guests analyse different issues and events. These kind of programs, are indeed of public interest.

TV talk shows can create awareness among the country's common people on different political, social, and economic issues. It also can play an important role in drawing the attention of the government and policy makers on their activities even in absence of oppositions in the parliament. As the parliament of Bangladesh does not always work properly, talk shows can create a forum to raise the people's voice (BBC Media Action, 2012).

Television Industry and Television Talk Shows in Bangladesh

The history of Bangladesh television (BTV) is embedded in the history of Pakistan Television (PTV). Television was introduced in East Pakistan in December 1964 with the

opening of Dhaka station of PTV. Dhaka Station started its regular broadcasting in 1968. After the liberation war in 1971, Bangladesh government took control of the television network remaining in East Pakistan and the network was named Bangladesh television (Bhuiyan, 2002).

Bangladesh entered the era of satellite broadcasting in 1992, by giving access to CNN and the BBC to broadcast on the government-regulated channel – BTV. After this, it was expected that television channels would bring down the barriers stopping poor and marginalised people of the country accessing information. In the context of a dominance of foreign satellite channels in the country, ATN *Bangla*, the first *Bangla* private satellite channel came into being on July 15, 1997. ATN *Bangla* aimed at telecasting programmes in *Bangla* language for the viewers in more than one hundred countries across the world. *Channel-i*, established in 1999, is the first- ever digital *Bangla* television channel in Bangladesh. *Ekushey Television* (ETV), the first private terrestrial channel in Bangladesh began transmission in 2000. Now, there are around 30 television channels in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, the history of talk show is not very old phenomenon. During 2002-03, when Bangladesh continued to suffer from its complexities in politics, talk show programmes were introduced. “*Tritiyo Matra*” is the first television talk show program in Bangladesh (www.tritiyomatra.com, 2013). In 2008, BBC World Service Trust introduced “*Songlap*”, a radio talk show program in Bangladesh (Page, 2008). The popularity of “*Tritiyo Matra*” and “*Songlap*” has promoted other television channels to introduce talk shows in various subjects and forms. Currently, almost all television channels have at least one talk show in a week. A talk show is a television or radio program where group of people discuss various topics moderated by a talk show host (Stelter, September 30, 2010). Sometimes, talk shows feature a panel of guests, usually consisting of a group of people who have great experience in relation to whatever issue is being discussed on the show for that episode.

Public Sphere

The concept of ‘public sphere’ term was developed by Habermas in 1962. It refers to the notion of a public domain or arena where debates and discussion on various issues take place. According to Habermas, the principles of the public sphere initially evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Europe, involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern, where issues relevant to the public good could be subject to informed debate and examination (Habermas, 1962). Habermas’ idea of public sphere is the principle of equal opportunity for

everyone to participate in a debate, and the ability of individuals to communicate, negotiate and articulate ideas amongst themselves (Wahab, 2011). Thus, the public sphere presupposed freedom of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making.

Habermas' notion of public sphere is same as the idea of participatory democracy by which democratic decisions come out, and that inform political action in society are reached. According to Habermas, the collapse of feudalism and the rise of middle class society in the 18th century, contributed a great deal in promoting his idea of participatory democracy. This kind of public sphere was an important agent in achieving the ideal condition for civil society. During the 18th century, the growth of coffee shops, salons and other public spaces, and the press created forum for self-expressions as well as platform for expressing opinions and agendas for public discussions which are free from state and market intervention (Wahab, 2011).

Interestingly, Habermas had also argued that media could be seen as providing space for every section in society, which includes marginalised individuals or group, to discuss their issues. Nowadays, media, especially television talk show is considered a spatial forum - that stimulates public discussion on various issues essential for the democratic process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher has reviewed research articles and dissertations done on television and public sphere. In a research conducted on Pakistani television talk shows titled "Critical Discourse Analysis of Political TV Talk Shows of Pakistani Media," the researchers have found that political talk shows broadcast by private TV channels are working apparatuses of ideology and store meanings which are not always obvious for readers (Bilal & others, 2012). The study on reality talk shows in Tamil television channels in India, reveals that reality talk shows are effective and audience are able to relate to the topic discussed in the show (Prasad, 2012). In a study conducted on "television talk shows and the public sphere" in Malaysia, the study has found that television, especially talk show is used essentially to promote the ideology of the ruling elite (Wahab, 2011). A recent study on talk shows in Bangladesh satellite television channels has showed that talk shows reflect agenda of different political parties. The study also found that, nowadays, talk shows are grabbing attention of the public in Bangladesh (Rahman & Marjan, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher has used content analysis and survey methods along with in-depth interview for data collection. Content analysis is widely used and a popular methodology in media research. It is a systematic, objective, and quantitative method to identify specific characteristics of a body of materials (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). It consists of measuring lengths; counting words, phrases, images, and any specific phenomenon in a given set of texts; and summing them up (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). For content analysis, the researcher selected two television talk shows based on their popularity, credibility and other circumstances. Besides, to collect related information other talk shows of private television channels were also observed. The selected television talk shows are “*Tritiyo Matra*” of *Channel-i* television and “*Ekattor Journal*” of *Ekushey* television. The talk shows were selected from November 25, 2014 to January 05, 2015. During this time, Bangladesh was going through a turbulent political situation. “*Tritiyo Matra*” by Zillur Rahman, an award-winning program on Channel i television, is one of the pioneer talk-shows of Bangladesh. By 2008, more than 12 million audience had made the “*Tritiyo Matra*” a part of their nightly television viewing routine. The one-hour program is broadcast twice a day for all 365 days of a year (www.tritiyomatra.com, 2013). On the other hand, “*Ekattor Journal*” is also a prominent talk show of *Ekattor* television. It telecasts the talk show at 11:30 pm. A recent audience survey has shown that “*Ekattor Journal*” is the most popular talk show in Bangladesh (Rahman & Marjan, 2013). Both talk shows can be viewed from most places around the world.

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents to find out the subjective nature of the decision-making process regarding the talk shows. In-depth interviews were held with talk show host, media professionals, academicians, audience and talk show guests to know different perspectives.

Research Questions

The following main research questions were posed for the inquiry of this study.

RQ 1: Do the talk shows of Bangladeshi television channels play a vital role as a public sphere?

RQ 2: Which factors are responsible for establishing or not establishing a real public sphere by the talk shows of Bangladeshi television channels?

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this study, the researcher has analysed episodes from November 25, 2014 to January 5, 2015, of “*Tritiyo Matra*” of *Channel-i* and “*Ekattor Journal*” of *Ekattor TV*.

Limited Space for Mass People

The study has found that, 52 politicians and civil society members attended 42 episodes of “*Tritiyo Matra*”. On the other hand, the “*Ekattor Journal*” authority invited 45 politicians, civil society members, and those occupying top positions in the society. There were only four female guests in the episodes of talk shows of both the channels during the study period. Furthermore, talk shows often were lacking both the resources and the will to find local and unpopular voices. Thus, talk shows of Bangladeshi satellite television channels are mostly elite centric, male centric and Dhaka capital of Bangladesh centric. There exists very limited space for common people.

A few television talk shows accept people participation via telephone or social networking sites like Facebook, twitter, etc. On January 1, 2014, the “*Tritiyo Matra*” of *channel-i* has showed peoples’ comment in Facebook on the television screen. During the whole programme a good number of comments were made but only two comments were shown on the television screen. Thus, the comments are also regulated strictly by the channel authorities. Marzia Akhter, a regular audience of television talk shows was asked by the *channel i* authority on which subject she wants to comment. It was also found that, the channel authority decides who will participate in the talk show program and what the topic is. Thus, commoners cannot participate in the discussion due to this sort of choices and regulations.

Discussions Are Not About Civic Rights

Public sphere is a realm where the civic rights and people oriented subjects are usually discussed, but the situation of the talk shows in Bangladeshi television channels is totally

different. Political discussions are most welcome in the television talk shows. The study has found that, the “*Tritiyo Matra*” has politics related discussions in 38 days out of 42 days’ programs, where the “*Ekattor Journal*” is related to politics. It may be relevant to mention that a survey, carried out by Rahman and Marjan, found that 41% of the respondents named politics, 21% named economy, 25% named social and civic thought as main discussion topic in Bangladeshi television talk shows (Rahman & Marjan, 2013:154). The content of the two talk shows are based on little research and no real moderation. Researcher has found, on January 3, 2015 the content of all television talk shows were on politics. In the two television talk show programs, discussion is much polarised, with a few exceptions. Politicians, business people and other decision makers decide what the issues and discussions are. Shahed Alam, a prominent talk show host of Bangladesh, said that “talk show guests cannot express their opinion independently. Thus, it hampers television talk shows as a public sphere”. Discussants of the talk shows sometime are involved in conflict. He also said in his interview, “The ideology has gone. So, no healthy political culture of dialogue and debate is possible, especially as the parties don’t practice democracy within the parties themselves”

Commercialization of Talk Shows

Over the past decade, large privately owned Bangladeshi corporations have moved into the media market, and most of the national media is now owned by one of the seven biggest corporate groups in the country (A.C. Nielsen, 2011). These are largely buyers of media advertising and eager to reach an attractive advertising market (Wassener, 2012).

Table 1 :Advertisements in Bangladeshi Television Talk Shows

Sl. no.	Name of the Talk Shows	Advertisement
1	<i>Tritiyo matra</i>	<i>Grameenphone Tritiyo Matra</i>
2	<i>Ekushey Rat</i>	<i>Banglalink Ekushey Rat</i>
3	<i>Ajker Bangladesh</i>	<i>Grameenphone Ajker Bangladesh</i>
4	<i>Sompadokio</i>	<i>Sitalpur Auto Steel Mills Limited Sombadokiyo</i>
5	<i>Songbad Songlap</i>	<i>Purbachal Regent Town Songbad Songlap</i>

6	<i>Muktobak</i>	<i>Akij Cement Muktobak</i>
7	Our Democracy	<i>Agrani Bank Limited Our Democracy</i>
8	News and Views	<i>Pran Frooto News and Views</i>

In Bangladesh, most of talk shows are sponsored by multinational companies. In the study, the researcher has found that, “*Tritiyo Matra*” of Channel-*i* and “*Ajker Bangladesh*” of Independent TV are sponsored by *Grameen Phone*.

The graphics of Talk Shows carry three logos of *Grameen Phone* company. Background color and front desk color is similar as *Grameen Phone* logo. The *Grameen Phone* company, sometimes, request the talk show host to invite particular guests.

“*Ekattor Journal*” is sponsored by “SAS X BAR Shafiul Alam Steel Limited” of Bangladesh. On 20 December 2014, the advertisement of *Shafiul Alam Steel Limited* occupied most part of TV screen during the entire episode and moving images of ads during talk shows were distracting viewers attention. Besides, advertisement of BBS cables, *Grameenphone*, Nescafe and Jarwe house also occupied the tv screen. Shamim AL Amin, anchor of the *Ekattor Journal* said, advertisement firms and agencies are requested to invite guests in the talk show programs. Most of the time, the invited guests have no idea about the topic. Thus, public is deceived by watching in-depth analysis of any topic or issue by people who are non-entities.

Government Censorship

The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees freedom of press with limited restriction. Moreover, a series of draconian laws enable the government to control the media (Reporters without Borders, 2006). The study has found that, Television channels especially talk show programs in Bangladesh face restrictions from the government.

In 2008, the military-backed caretaker government of Bangladesh asked the private television channels to avoid telecasting all kinds of live talk shows (Daily Star, January 26, 2008). Earlier on January 24th night 2014, *Ekushey Television* authorities received a fax message, without mentioning the name and signature of the sender, to cancel its scheduled live popular talk show program “*Ekushey Somoy*” and “*Ekushey Raat*”. Some other private channels also received similar instructions. Following the direction, *Ekushey Television* authority

cancelled broadcasting of its live talk shows. A few days later, television channels got permission to telecast talk shows on nine-point conditions. After that, television channels started to broadcast live talk shows though the government suggested avoiding live talk shows. Meanwhile, Channel-i has stopped audience's question of its live talk show "*Nirbachito Khabor*" (Daily Star, 25 January 2008). Thus, talk show programs are failure to form a public dialogue. Television channels are regulated by the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC), under the Telecommunication Act of 2001. The organization is a government appointed and funded body. As a result, govt. can regulate programs of any private television channels. Until now, there is no broadcast policy in Bangladesh. In 2010, the Awami League-led government prepared the draft of Private Broadcasting Policy in 2010. Rubaiyat Ferdous, Associate Professor of Mass Communication, and Journalism department of Dhaka University points out that the provisions make the policy open to subjective interpretations. He says, "In the absence of proper definition and power to the Broadcast Commission, the policy can be used to serve different government interest and purposes" (Yusuf, February 07, 2014). Furthermore, National Parliament is always critical of talk shows for inviting only anti-government guests.

Talk Shows as an Ideological State Apparatus

In Bangladesh, Media owners have developed a symbiotic relationship with the ruling class comprising of big industrialists, traders, politicians, members of Parliament, both army and civil bureaucrats, and members of governments in last two decades (Islam, 2002). As a result, media institutions, especially talk show programs have worked as an ideological state apparatus of the government. A recent study has found that, talk shows have selective guests for setting agenda or for political ideology. Occasionally, producers of talk shows select weak guests from the opponent political ideology and select strong and vocal guests from the allied political ideology (Rahman & Marjan, 2013:158). Thus, the voice of opposite political groups are muted in the talk show program. Shahed Alam has said that the relations between television talk shows and public sphere depends on the authority of television channel, government and regulations on talk shows. Criticisms against government are not accepted in the talk shows and voices of the oppositions are restricted.

CONCLUSION

In the television talk shows, discussions are very polarised, with a few exceptions. Politicians, business people and other decision makers decide on the issues and discussions of talk shows, says the study. Almost every talk show program is sponsored by multinational corporations. These companies, sometimes, invite their selective guests. Government also directly controls the talk shows. Thus, talk shows have not played proper role as a public sphere. Talk show programs have worked as an ideological state apparatus of the government. The study has identified several reasons for the failure of talk shows of *Bangladeshi* television channels in not playing the role of public sphere.

- Talk shows of *Bangladeshi* satellite television channels are mostly elite centric, male centric and Dhaka city centric.
- There is limited space for public.
- Participation of public is also limited in the talk show programs.
- Contents of talk shows of Bangladeshi satellite television are ill-informed.
- There is no real moderation policy for talk show.
- Government, multinational companies have tried to control talk show programs.

If talk shows of *Bangladeshi* television channels rectify the existing flaws, then talk show program will be meaningful from the perspective of public sphere.

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