

Cover Story

Revolution Television

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Afreen Dewan in Dallas, Texas, after text messaging her own vote, calls up her friends and family in the US, Canada and Bangladesh to ask them to vote for her favourite candidate in Close Up 1 Tomakey Khujchhe Bangladesh. The talent hunt show started in 2005 on private television channel ntv and was an instant hit. It sought young singers from around the country, filtered from thousands to 16 finalists, then 10, five and three to the winner. It was a big success in its first year and even bigger in the second, which recently ended last December with Bangladeshis living in the UK and US also participating. Besides the jury panel, audience from home and abroad text messaged their votes by cell phone to help their favourite win.

This is only one example of just how interactive television has become. Add to that all the talk shows, phone-in and question-answer programmes, and "idiot-box" seems hardly an appropriate name anymore! For, though dramas, films and other such entertainment programmes may still be the most popular on television, infotainment programmes are rapidly gaining wide popularity among the audience.

Kha Ma Harun, Chief of Programmes, Rtv, has been working in the television media since 1980. "At the time," says Harun, "we started an audience research cell at Bangladesh Television (BTV) and found that dramas were the most popular programmes." There were, however, very few dramas at the time, says Harun, only one a week. "Drama serials like 'Shokal Shondhya', 'Sukhtara', 'Dhaka-e Thaki' started later, in around 1981," he recalls. "They were long dramas, running for around 50 minutes per episode, not 20 or 25 like they do today. They were very popular."

But Bangladeshis are very knowledge-hungry, says Harun. "They are eager to know the latest news, information on contemporary lifestyle, etc. BTV's news was never credible," he says, "and was always criticised. The news was as unpopular as dramas were popular."

Indeed, research has shown that local content is the first preference of television audience. Only if it is not satisfying do they turn next to regional, and finally, to global content. Local appeal combined with quality are deciding factors in choosing television content. Due to BTV's fallen quality, those who had the choice obviously turned to other, foreign options.

But when private television channel Ekushey (ETV) was launched, things changed, says Harun. "ETV brought a new, modern style of news presentation, similar to some of the best news in the world such as BBC. They trained their reporters, presenters, etc., accordingly and soon the news became even more popular than dramas as people began to know what was happening everywhere instantly."

Ever since private channels came into operation and began their news broadcasts, etc., people have been given a platform to voice their views and opinions, agrees Shykh Seraj, Director and Head of News, Channel i.

Concurrently, talk shows also started. "Talk shows have made people knowledgeable," says Seraj. "They have created awareness among people about issues like democracy."

One
of
the
first
and



"Tritiyo Matra" is one of the first and most watched political talk shows



Along with politicians, regular citizens are also more vocal today through interactive television programmes



With viewers hungry for information and analysis, talk shows are becoming increasingly popular.



"Nirbachon 2007" on Channel i has been especially designed with the upcoming elections in mind

most popular talk shows today is in fact Channel i's "Tritiyo Matra". "Tritiyo Matra, in the over three years it has been broadcast, has had a big impact," says Shykh Seraj. "There is a lot of bitterness between our politicians," he says, "and they never used to even sit beside each other. On 'Tritiyo Matra', they do. Before, they used to argue a lot, but they've moved away from that and now they actually discuss and debate on important political issues."

Not only politicians, but regular citizens are also much more vocal today through interactive programmes on television like Channel i's "Public Reaction" and ntv's "Muktangon".

"Before," says Seraj, "people used to run if they saw a microphone. Now they actually come forward and speak out."

When Channel i first started its phone-in programmes, recalls Seraj, they used to get hardly five calls in one hour. "Now, the calls just keep coming," he says. "The media has played a huge role in creating not only awareness among people about their rights but also eagerness to ask questions, voice their opinions, etc."

While shows like "Tritiyo Matra", "Onnyo Drishti" on ATN Bangla, "Article 39" on Banglavisision and "Mot Motantor" on Channel 1 usually bring in politicians or prominent citizens to discuss contemporary political issues among themselves, others bring in audience participation as well. "Agamir Kantho" on Banglavisision and "Na Bola Kotha" and "Saaf Kotha" on Channel i bring in these personalities to face questions from members of the audience who are present with their own input as well as queries. Other shows like "Tele-Helpline" on Channel i have the audience phone in to put questions to the panel of discussants, on issues ranging from the political crisis to consumer rights.

The good thing about these shows is that they give people scope for open discussion. This was unheard of just a few years ago, when editing as well as self-censorship prevented people from speaking their minds. While this allows politicians to give what may be a less-than-honest version of things, it has helped to bring many issues out into the open which were previously swept under the carpet, whether due to political reasons or social taboo.



Rmusic with Ayub Bachchu on Rtv has been quite a hit

Talk



Children have also found a voice on private television channels

shows have brought a new dimension to television, says Kha Ma Harun. But they are not easy to produce. "Just like news, all the technical things like lights, sets, are required. In addition, both the hosts and the discussants must be not only well-informed but also good speakers and presenters."

Besides talk shows, there are a whole range of other programmes on our private television channels today. These include morning shows, reviews of the day's newspapers and the week's news, musical programmes, shows on home living and cooking shows, such as the ever popular "Siddiqa Kabir's Recipe" on ntv. Ntv has also broadcast quiz shows and debate programmes in the past. One of the channel's new additions is "Fame and Fortune", in which viewers text message their answers to quiz questions to win prizes. Another recently launched programme is "Shomo Shomoy" on art, literature and culture.

Yet another new programme on ntv is called "Shomporko". "Usually when we talk about relationships we're talking about husband-wife relationships," says Mustafa Kamal Sayed, Chief of Programmes at ntv. "'Shomporko' focuses on sibling

relationships between personalities coming in who the audience perhaps didn't even know were siblings! The show started this past Eid with Sharmili and Jolly."

Many shows bring in celebrities. Some popular ones include writer Emdadul Haque Milon's "Ki Kotha Tahar Shathe" on ntv and "Amar Ami" with actress Api Karim on Banglavisión. "Jugolbondi", hosted by actress Shanta Islam on Rtv, features celebrity couples. Still others have the audience phone in with questions as on "Taroka Kathon" on Channel i. Actress Shoumi Kaiser talks to women from different professions in each episode of "Joyitar Joyjatra" on ntv. There are of course also the Islamic programmes on all the channels, in which Muslim clerics discuss as well as take questions on Islam from the audience through letters and emails.

Many programmes are occasion-based. The recent Eid saw a wide range of not only dramas and tele-films on all the different channels, but also magazine programmes, celebrity talk shows, etc. Similarly, the upcoming general elections are cause for heated debate and discussion. Programmes like "Nirbachon 2007" with Muhammad Jahangir on Channel i, "Gonotontro o Nirbachon" and "Prothom Voter" on ntv (on first-time voters), have been especially designed with them in mind.

Entertainment is still the prime purpose of television around the world, believes Nawazish Ali Khan, Senior Vice President, Programmes, ATN Bangla. "After that," says Khan, "people are interested in hot topics in the news, politics, etc. But even politics has become glamorous now."

"According to Television Rating Point (TRP), entertainment programmes on television are still at the top," says Khan. "Talk shows have gained some viewership, like 'Meet the Press' on ATN. But they rarely get ratings." Khan recalls a good show aired on ATN in the past on art and literature called "Kotha Bola", "But it didn't do very well," he says. "It really all depends on how big, how glamorous a programme is."

"Right now, because of the upcoming elections, people watch talk shows, etc., because of the excitement, controversy and bickering surrounding the elections," says Khan. "Once the elections are over, I think the popularity of such shows will decline."

Ideally, says Khan, television, especially in developing countries, should be focusing on educational programmes. But we see very little of this, if any. "Even what is shown is sugar-coated," he says. "And so we have film actress Shabnur talking about HIV/AIDS instead of a qualified doctor, because that's who people want to see. It's all about entertainment."

"The main revenue of television channels still comes from dramas," agrees Mustafa Kamal Sayed. "And so, in any given week, more dramas are shown than talk shows or even films."

"Drama as a genre is just the most popular," says Sayed. "Dramas are a part of life and people get more emotionally involved in them than they do with any other programme. Talk shows and other programmes have educational value, but people don't take them to heart or remember them as much."

Shykh Seraj, however, disagrees. "Dramas used to be the most popular television programme," he says, "but then came shows like 'Chhayachhondo' -- on film songs -- then magazine programmes." People's tastes have changed over the decades and this is reflected in the television content, says Seraj. Channel i, for example, does not air only entertainment programmes during "prime time".



Political talk show "Onnyo Drishti" on ATN Bangla



Shykh Seraj, Channel i

Nawazish Ali Khan, ATN Bangla

Mustafa Kamal Sayed, ntv

Kha Ma Harun, Rtv



On "Meet the Press", politicians take questions from journalists in the different media

"The concept of prime time itself has become redundant in today's global age," says Seraj. "Prime time used to be the time between about 6 or 7 in the evening to about 10 at night. But when you're broadcasting 24 hours around the world, what is prime time here is early morning in other countries and vice versa. Thus all the time is prime time and the popularity of shows like 'Tritiyo Matra', broadcast at 1 in the morning and re-telecast at 9 in the morning, is proof of that."

As for advertising sponsors, before, before advertising programmes, says Seraj. Now, other programmes get a share of the ads previously given to the former. "Programmes like news and talk shows have also become entertaining," he says, "which is why ads during the news are the most expensive."

With so many channels airing similar programmes, does quality suffer? And is there still anything missing?

"I think there are too many channels," says 19-year-old Riaz Ahmed, a student of North South University. "There is not enough substance and the content becomes diluted."

Samiul Haq thinks the number of channels is fine, but their content could be better. "The talk shows are good," he says. "I always stop while flicking through channels if there is a talk show on and watch it. The open discussions there are good. But the overall quality of the channels could improve. If it does, then there's no harm in there being many channels. But we don't want quantity at the price of quality."

Twenty-five-year-old Arman Khan thinks the channels lack creativity. "They're all copycats," complains Arman. "In the case of the cooking shows, our channels have copied from Indian television. As for the talk shows, there were one or two good ones, and the rest just copied them."

"Sometimes programmes become repetitive," admits **Mustafa Kamal Sayed** of ntv. "Regarding the elections, for example, different angles must be explored, not the same one over and over again on every programme on every channel."

His channel is careful not to repeat itself, says Sayed. "It all really depends on the presentation," he says. "At the end of the day, the issues, the programmes, are similar. It's how they are presented, in a new style, new angle, that makes all the difference."

On the other hand, some people think there are things still missing on the television screen.

"There aren't as many programmes for young people," opines Arman Khan.

Kha Ma Harun of Rtv thinks programmes on classical music are being sorely missed. "Rtv has started a classical music show in the mornings with this in mind," he says. "It may not be a big hit, but for many it will be a relief to turn on the television in the morning and be able to listen to classical music."

Also more or less absent, notes Harun, are game shows. "The Bangladeshi audience just do not take to game shows as much," he says. Harun recalls a time when game shows were introduced, but they did not strike a chord with our audience.

Shykh Seraj of Channel i believes that what is missing in many of the existing shows is specialisation. "Daily news and events are covered, news-related issues are discussed, but they are not very in-depth," he says. "They could be more research-oriented. More background work is needed, but this requires a lot of time, dedication and training, which most of us lack or are unwilling to give."

As for the issue of there being too many channels, Kha Ma Harun believes that there are as many channels as are needed, with room for more. "It's the demand of the times," says Harun. "We have some 10 channels. Neighbouring India and China have around eight and 10 times our population respectively. Accordingly, India has over a hundred channels, and China has over a thousand. And these are not only for entertainment. In China, for example, official instructions are aired on the channels telling people what to do, many of the channels being specific to different cities or municipalities."

Despite the spread of television, people still read newspapers, says Harun, which just goes to show that no one medium can take over another. "Each will run at its own pace," he says. "Newspaper circulation has actually risen. This is due to increasing literacy and a growing middle and upper class who get the latest news on television but read the paper the next morning for the news in detail."

In addition, says Harun, the television industry has contributed to the economy. "Where there was only BTV, now some 10 private channels and hundreds of production houses employ lakhs of employees who provide for thousands of families. They include producers, directors, writers, editors, technical crew, etc., all of whom have helped build the industry."

And indeed, the Bangladeshi television industry is a growing one, with new channels going on the air every few months. There are currently 10 private channels in operation and a few on test transmission, with 69 more reportedly awaiting government permission to launch. Also due to go on the air soon is Bangladesh's first 24-hours news channel, CSB TV News. It seems that in our country, television channels have become like any other commodity for sale. How else does one explain an ad in a national daily asking the reader to "Own a TV Channel" for as little as \$USD 9,950?

Yet, even with all the competition, credibility is still an issue.

"I don't trust the news even on private channels," says Riaz Ahmed. "They seem to be a bit slanted. BTV may be the government mouthpiece, but private channels also seem to be the mouthpiece of their owners, many of whom are, interestingly, immediate past government lawmakers while one or two of them seem to support the opposition. You can tell by the angle they take on political news items, especially with the elections coming up and all the turmoil surrounding it."

It is alleged that objectivity and democracy are lacking even on private television channels. Media experts, academicians and politicians have pointed out that in the absence of proper media policy, licences for launching new channels are given based on political consideration. Thus the launching of at least five channels during the immediate past government's tenure, owned by its party members and cronies. And, with the upcoming elections, a change in power -- or not -- may be reflected on the silver screen. The closing down of ETV in 2002 -- allegedly due to political reasons -- is still fresh in people's minds, especially now that the channel has begun test transmission under the current caretaker government, on its way to being re-launched.

The threat of politicians and businesspeople becoming journalists is a grave one to press freedom and objectivity. There is always the question of just where these politicians got the estimated 60 to 70 crore taka to effectively run a television station. In addition, the dark deeds of the owning politicians -- as well as large advertising sponsors -- will be conveniently covered up by the media. Those of their adversaries will be highlighted and the audience will be left at a loss, trying to piece things together and figure out for themselves what exactly is happening.

Overall, however, the response to private television channels has been positive.



Muslim clerics discuss and answer audience queries on religion

"There is no inbuilt mechanism for rating programmes in our country," says **Mustafa** Kamal Sayed of ntv, "but audience response in the form of letters, emails, etc., is good."

Kha Ma Harun, however, refers to the ratings of Sirius, an organisation which rates the top 25 programmes of each day for advertisers. "Many of Rtv's programmes are often on their list," says Harun, "including 'R music', 'Hi tension', 'Prithibir Pothe Pothe' (a travel show) and 'Just Band'."

A proper system of rating programmes is, however, necessary, says Harun, and organisations should come forward to do this.

Television has entered a new era where its purpose is not merely to entertain. Today, not only does it inform the audience about the latest in what is happening, but it gives them the opportunity to express themselves by voicing their own thoughts and opinions. The glamour of the silver screen combined with its education-information value and, most recently, its interactivity, has made television more popular and more important than ever before.

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