

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 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 Banglavision. "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."

"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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