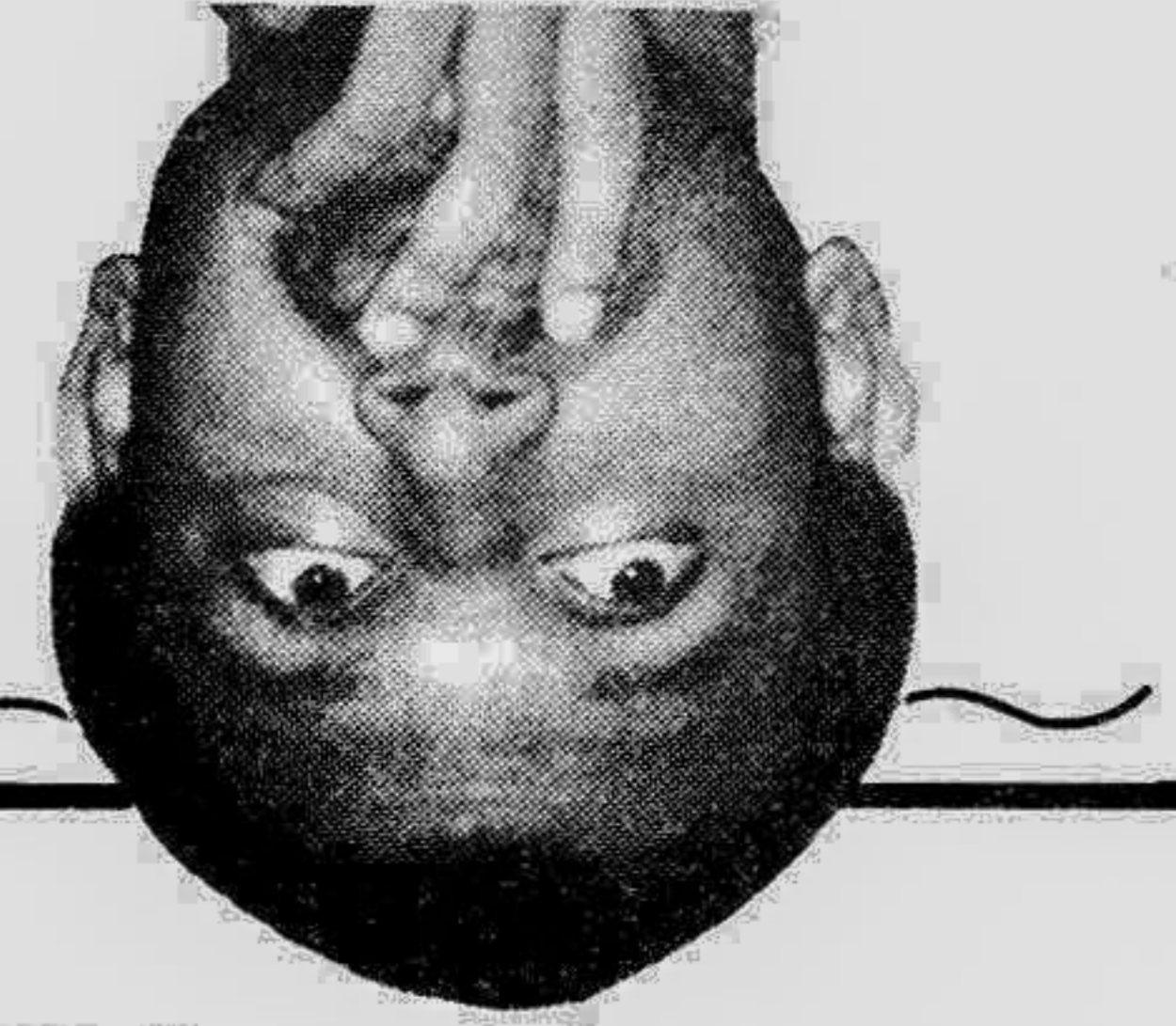


# YEP TALK



## New Horizons in the Tele-Media: Impacts, Trends, Directions . . .

Face The Young: Organized by The Daily Star and The British Council

**Mahfuz Anam:** The audio-visual medium has become a very important matter. Our country is going to have private television channels. The government has taken a decision in this regard. There is going to be private radio. Initiative has already been taken to involve the private sector in BTv by means of package programmes. We have free air too, sitting in Dhaka seeing programmes from all over the world. We can see quite a number of Indian channels. We can see PTV, French channels.

Where do we stand? Everyone admits that we watch BTv less. Even our artists say that if they do a programme on Zee TV rather than BTv, more people watch the programme. So this is our situation.

We will first listen to the opinion of those present here, Afzal Hossain, Jewel Aich, Anisur Rahman and Mohammad Jahangir.

**Anisur Rahman:** I am to be speaking here today as a conscious viewer about what we should see, not see, or how much should our expectations be to tele-media. But none of us really have the right to say what everyone will view.

I think it is very fortunate that we have the tele-media at present in the manner as Mahfuz Anam described. We have access to all the information being handed out by the international media. The choice is ours, what we want to see or don't want to see. We have the right to view everything, whether it is good or bad. It is necessary to observe the bad too. If the Creator created the devil, we should know that devil well too. We must decide whether we will embrace him or reform him or kill him. It is our choice and so we must know him. So we will view everything. It will depend on the individuals character as to who will watch how much of what. It will depend on the ambition of the individual's life. If a person is oriented towards constructive work, then he will make his choice accordingly.

Our problem is the authority over this wonderful technology which we can avail today. The quarters in whose hands the authority lies as to what can come through this technology, do not view it as a means for people's growth. Media is a technology. The problem lies in who chooses what should come through this media. We all know that authority lies in two hands, one in the market and one, to a large extent, with the government. Herein lies the problem. The government has its faults, but you can't dismiss the concept of government. Neither can you dismiss the concept of the media, the satellite dish and so on. The question is whether or not this is being used for the welfare of the people.

So what should be seen or not seen? I would sum this up as it is something which a person is to choose himself, in accordance to how he wants to develop himself. But the problem lies in those through whom the choice comes. They do not necessarily have the people's interests in mind when they make these choices.

The next point is, what will our expectations from the tele-media be? We cannot have very high regard for the social and cultural spirit of the leadership we have during the present social conditions. Many things are just being left to the market. This is true in the case of many things, for example the open-market of today, everything is being left to this. If things are to change so that we can use the tele-media in an actually constructive manner and for pure entertainment, a social movement and change is necessary, as in the case of the economy and other sectors. This is not a matter of blaming the satellite dish or the tele-media. It is our social character, values wherein our problem lies.

**Mahfuz Anam:** The issue highlighted by Anisur is the freedom of choice. He said that we should have accessibility to what is going on in the world. Then he mentioned the two major actors in the media field. One is market, the other is the government. The channels which we see are either government channels or market channels, that is private channels. So, where do we stand here?

I want to add a couple of points. There is a question which hovers in the background. That is the question of cultural identity. Where do we stand in this international scenario? What do we have to do to find a place for ourselves?

Then as viewers, we want to see everything in this free world. It's up to us what we watch or don't watch. That needs viewers' education, whether I am being a quality viewer or not. In the western world there is a liberal environment where in the US you can publish anything, from pornography to the highest literary work. There a large number of books are sold. A good writer sells a million copies of his or her books. So we see that in a liberal environment, artistic work flourishes, but there are the other deviations too. So in places where we say we will not accept such deviant literature, we see at the same time that it is not necessary that very creative works are flourishing there either.

The matter is complex and is fundamentally involved with freedom, with culture, with creativity. The tele-media is so powerful. It has a multiplicity of influence. It is the carrier of my culture, carrier of my ideas. Will Afzal speak now?

**Afzal Hossain:** I have been assigned to speak on the past, present and future of the advertisement industry.

When I was a student, advertisement films hadn't been given that much importance. By advertisements we would mean advertisements in the newspapers or the radio. None of these were really creative. At present we face several questions.

When the viewers are seeing commercials on foreign channels, they compare our advertisements with theirs. They say, that country has such good ads, why doesn't ours? My reply is that, the person who asks this question does not take into consideration which country he is comparing the country with which he is comparing the country's advertisements? An advertisement needs a budget. The advertisement is made based on the budget. So I don't think there is any justification in comparing the advertisements.

We have limitations. If we want to do anything creative on television, we have to be cautious. We don't know where this creativity will pose an obstruction. It is easier just to follow the plain path. We just dance, sing and the product is displayed. This is convenient. But if you want to be very creative, you have to answer a hundred and one questions and the film may not be shown. These are the obstacles faced. I can give an example. I recently finished a advertisement in which there was the scene of a play. The costumes were jatra costumes. The scene of the play is that the villain of the jatra, sword in hand, is dragging the heroine away. The hero comes up and shouts, 'Let her go, you shaitan (devil)!'. The censor of the television said, you can't use the word shaitan. So the villain is not a shaitan. Even in dramas, you can't use the word shaitan. I felt so bad. I felt like sending the jatra costumes to those persons who censored this. They should wear those costumes to office. They still live in those ages. I don't think they watch satellite. I don't think they have any idea what experiments are going on in the advertisement world. We don't have the opportunities to dabble in such experiments. We may be technically weak. But do the sizes of brains differ from country to country? I don't think so. Given the opportunity, our brains can be fertile too.

There are many obstacles. The main one is that we have to be dependent on television. The censor of the television have to be taken into consideration when making the ads. Bangladesh Television still follows the censorship rules drawn up after independence by the persons who had fought for the freedom of the country.

**Jewel Aich:** Power can be used in a positive manner, in a negative manner. A knife in the hand of a terrorist can be used for murder, in the hand of a surgeon can save a life. We all agree that media is an extremely powerful thing, it may become more powerful than weapons.

There is a matter of personal ego fulfillment. When we watch a cinema, we watch with a host of other people. We can't just do what we want. When we drive a car, we have to follow certain discipline. We have to stop for the red light, keep to the left of the road, have a licence, etc. But when television arrived, we had the opportunity for ultimate ego fulfillment. If we can answer a question, we say it's stupid. If we can't, we decry the person as 'intellectual'.

Media is such a powerful thing that I would say it will become more powerful than weapons. At present we see a lot of love, a lot of sex and its perversion and violence all over. At one time I too felt that this was finishing our society. But we cannot close our eyes to what is coming. This will continue in its own manner. If we look at the world today, we will see that 70 per cent of human effort goes behind destroying human beings, to use weapons, planning the use of weapons, war. Only 30 per cent is used for development. Just think about this. Even so, man is going ahead. I believe that man makes mistakes, makes errors repeatedly. Cancers like Hitler have come to the world. By cancer I mean the cells growing outside the normal development cells. Even so, society went ahead.

If we compare this world to a canvas, we can ask, which colour is better, red or blue, black or green? But this world's canvas is made of thousands of colours and we are or so may races, speaking so many different languages, eating so many varieties of food. The media is uniting the world and I do not see much negative with this. When the world is ready for war, when 70 per cent of the world's resources is going towards war, a lot of our problems are resolved when the media reveals all these plans.

We hear people saying that the habit of reading is getting lost. People only watch easy-to-swallow TV programmes. They are forgetting how to read books. This is not true. Only people who don't read books say this. Those of you who have visited Barnes and Noble will see how much their sales have increased. Then those who go to Foyles in London. You went last year. Go this year and see the difference. There are so many books and so many being bought. So things just don't fade away like that. Whatever new comes, we always say the old things are being finished off. Say if a daughter stops wearing a veil, we say she is finished. Then when the granddaughter wears pants, we say she is absolutely gone. We are so affected by social influence, if we see anything new approaching, we feel that all is lost. This is not how society is run.

In this world, people move ahead. They do not go back. You will see in Europe, where people have fought against each other down the centuries, they now have a European market. I am very lucky. Wherever I go with my green passport, a whole bundle I have. I always use just one. But once I had such good fortune, with this very same green passport, I went from Paris to London without a seal. To them, the passport is just an identity card.

So when the world is thus progressing, I

**Among those who participated:**  
**Mahfuz Anam**, Editor, The Daily Star.  
**Anisur Rahman**, Economist.  
**Mohammad Jahangir**, Executive Director, Centre for Development Communication.  
**Jewel Aich**, Magician.  
**Afzal Hossain**, Actor, AD Maker.  
**Golam Mustafa**, Cameraman,  
**Julfiqar Ahmed**, Director, Unitrend Ltd.  
**Rafi Hossain**, YEP TALK In-charge.

feel the media will play an extremely powerful role. I believe my culture will not disappear. We absorb culture from everywhere, from Germany, from China, everywhere. The word 'Chittagong' comes from China, meaning the best sea-port. Similarly, we have borrowed from the Koreans, from the Arabs. This is how language is embellished. It does not mean everyone will start talking in Urdu or Hindi or Persian. Others will be influenced by us. This is nothing wrong, as long as the influence is to be positive.

We talk about Saarc too. We cannot survive without helping each other. We wake up in the morning, have breakfast, take a rickshaw to work, return home. In course of the day, we interact with so many people. Not all of them speak Bengali, not all of them or Muslims, not all are Christian or Hindus, not all are socialists or capitalists. We are taking help from all, yet we are conspiring to kill it. It is as if we can only attain development if we kill them. We have slogans, cries, all with a religious flavour. I am talking of religion in a broader sense of the word. It is a fact that most of the killing all around the world has been done in the name of religion. This religious sentiment is that whatever I believe in is correct. Once I went to North Korea. The media is closed there. Only the government media functions. In Iran too the Taleban closed down the media. There is a fear of the media. Media is powerful.

Even an illiterate person can gain information from the media without reading. Even I turn to the media. It may take me four or five days to read up on a topic I want to understand. If I have no time, I just get a video on the subject and watch it. If it is worth it, I look up on the authority of the video and buy the necessary books. So there are people who don't have time to read, or who don't want to read. At least the media presents them the basic material. If you watch BBC and CNN even just an hour a day, you won't have to slog over books to find out what's going on in the world.

We see people who are blindly religious, wanting to shackle others in chains. They are like Talebans, ready to strangle people to death.

Media has power and this goes against these blind people. This is evident when we see totalitarianism. These are people who only believe what they think is right. They always clamp down on the media. This shows that media goes in a positive direction.

I believe one day man will be free of weapons. This may seem like a fantasy today. It would seem as if we would lose our country, our sovereignty without arms and ammunition. I cannot believe that 70 per cent of man's resources will simply be used to destroy each other while people are dying of cancer. I can't believe tonnes of food will be dumped into the ocean while people die of famine. This cannot be accepted.

Look at the United States. Here there are 52 states, with different laws, joined to form a single country. I believe one day the whole world will be one. Then 100 per cent of the world's resources will be used for people's welfare and I believe media will play a very positive role in this regard.

**Mahfuz Anam:** We are quite inspired by Jewel Aich's words. But there are a few questions. If we look at Jewel's dream that the world will be one, will we simply just be satisfied with BBC and CNN? CNN has its particular viewpoint and CNN is more criticised in this regard, more than BBC. BBC is more liberal and objective. But broadly speaking, it is the western perspective, the Anglo-European perspective. Will it help by having 10 CNNs, 15 BBCs?

Then about books. I had raised this issue. There is an increase in book reading. As you said, Barnes and Noble, Foyles, WH Smith are booming with books. But that is an exception. Those of you who have travelled with see that in all airports of the world there are book shops. But all of those book shops are the same. You get Jeffrey Archer, Gishams, Murdoch and those same few authors. The marketing is such that those 10 to 20 authors are becoming global bestsellers. But where are the other authors? So while on one hand the world is opening up, on the other hand certain things are flooding the market on a supply and demand basis. We like to eat all sort of food, but you get McDonald's all over the world. You get Coca Cola all over the world. There is no end to the debate whether this is good or bad. But this is the truth.

Where do we stand? As Jewel said, no one can take our culture away. But we have to have a creative participation in the global market place of ideas and cultural products. To stay there, we have to have creativity. We have gathered here today because of this complex situation which has emerged. I

share Jewel's positivism, but there is more. Jahangir?

**Mohammad Jahangir:** I was rather confused when I saw the title of this symposium. I was not sure what it was about. After listening to the deliberations so far, I am still confused. We have spoken of tele-media from an international perspective. Thought the title of the symposium did not mention Bangladesh anywhere, my common sense tells me we probably are talking about the situation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a large area. Let me reduce it in size, just to Rampura. The problems and the ideas we have regarding the media are mostly stemming from Rampura or, in a broader sense, are Dhaka-based.

I feel that we cannot justify the topic if we discuss the tele-media issue in too broad a manner. Let me give you an example. If we discuss the tele-media at present, the issues which arise include Bangladesh Television which was established as a public broadcasting service at one time. The comes the fact that we are getting a private channel in a few days time. What do we hope from this private channel? What do we expect from the satellite Bengali channels? Many private producers are making programmes for the television. They have their problems. They face many problems with the television. The matter calls for a separate seminar.

Another topic which can be discussed is research and audience research. There is overall media research and research of the viewers' opinions. This hasn't even begun even though our television is over 30 years old.

Training is another aspect. We are speaking of global matters, about competition, about BBC, CNN, private channels, but where is the manpower? Have we been able to build up the required manpower for this? Do we think of this. Does our print media which shows concern about so many issues, show concern about this?

Another issue is that the satellite channel.

**Golam Mustafa:** I was going to apply for a job when one of my friends told me not to because I wouldn't get it. I asked why. He said because I think differently, that I would be set apart. The job was for a 'yes man', someone who would simply carry out orders. Such people are given much importance in the television and in our line of work. That is why you see them their performances. Those who have the ability, they have to proceed amidst much obstacles.

**Rafi Hossain:** I see that we are all positive thinkers here. Though Jahangir bhai has said the matter is too vast, we all do look in the same direction. Jahangir bhai has said it's no use writing in the papers or holding seminars. It is no use making good advertisements. Then what will we do? Then what will we, the young generation do? It is not true that we can't do things. Look at Afzal bhai. He is a recognised producer. Jewel Aich is a magician of international standard. Jahangir bhai makes very good programmes on television. Tell us, what shall we do? Where are the answers?

**Mahfuz Anam:** What shall we do? In other places too we see that if there are stars, the programme sells more. Then there are 'yes men' too. This is nothing new. If those countries can achieve creative work even with such obstructions, then we can too.

Government control is there too. What can we do even with this in place? Anisur bhai, can you throw light on what can be done?

**Anisur Rahman:** Rafi said we are all on the same side. That is not true. A controversy has arisen. The question of control.

**Rafi Hossain:** When I said we were on the same side, I meant we were of the same opinion concerning quality. We want to do good, but it is not possible due to certain persons in the television. We all say this.

**Anisur Rahman:** That is true. We all want to do good work. The controversy is over the question of control.

The question of control is the question of guardianship. Some feel that they have to exercise guardianship in a manner that the choice is lessened. I don't think this is the correct way. Proper parenting is to help them to choose the good from the bad. This is parental guidance. It is a great responsibility. This parenting is a science of which we are still quite ignorant. The control which simple says you can't watch this, is absolutely negative.

At present, a large section of our young generation cannot see a fulfilling future in front of them, that is why they are being derailed. If this can't be changed, if a movement can't take off for this, just controlling the television will not help.

What we are controlling on television will be seen on the computer. This cannot be stopped. Once someone reaches a certain age, you can't tie him up anymore. So it is a big responsibility to prepare so that they control themselves.

And what is to be done? What you are doing. While many are being derailed, a large number, despite this lack of parental guidance, are doing very creative, very constructive work. They should be encouraged. Rafi, you and your colleagues are doing a good job. Continue to do so.

**Mohammad Jahangir:** Rafi has misquoted me. I didn't say that it was no use writing or holding seminars. I have always written that we are unable to use the power of media. Public opinion must be mobilised in this regard. Let more noise be made. I have always tried to say this. But unfortunately, the print media is very silent about the electronic media. They do not have interest in the business of the electronic media.

There are exceptions. The Daily Star does sometimes write editorials on the autonomy of the electronic media. But the Bengali newspapers give much more space to entertainment than to the issues of the electronic media which we have discussed here today. They prefer giving a summary of next week's drama, news of an actresses wedding, gossip, romantic stories, other programmes. But they do not write about the horrendous mismanagement within the television. If the print media fought aggressively for autonomy, I don't think that the government would be able to hesitate about it. The media has forced the government to take decisions on many other matters. Only a few newspapers have written about the fact that the government has simply put the report on the autonomy for radio and television on the shelf.

There should be pressure through a lot of writing, meetings and seminars. The artists themselves are silent. The young group of the Daily Star is having to hold this meeting. Where are the artists' organisations? Why are they speaking up on these issues? Is this problem not theirs? Is this just Afzal's problem? Just Rafi's problem? For some reason or the other, they are silent. They cannot focus on these issues, cannot create public opinion about these matters. That is why the government takes full advantage of the situation. I never discourage the young people to go ahead in this regard. I call upon them to be active against this mismanagement.

**Jewel Aich:** Anis bhai was right about parenting. It has to be there. An infant will grow in its mother's womb, will come to this world. It will cared for and then it will grow and live.

A few years ago in Dallas, a mother was tried for killing her child. The mother was 13 years old. It was very hot in Dallas. She left the baby in its cot and went shopping for hours. When she returned, she found her baby had become stiff and dead. The court charged her with murder. Now our parents, those who are to guide us, how much do they know about their children. How much do they care? What should they do? There are the sacrifices, staying up nights, changing nappies, feeding. There are doubts as to whether they are ready for this.

We all see Indian channels. At prime time, the important programmes are shown. There are classical music programmes at prime time. In our country, since the average person will not listen to classical music, it is said that this won't run here.

What do parents do? When we were children we would love to eat gur, sugar, but our parents would feed us corolla. Corolla will keep worms away, will help us health-wise. Gur will cause worms. Now if the parents feel that since the films with violence and sex will get more advertisements, so these should be shown, that is very bad. Before on Dhaka television there would be one classical music programme a month. It wouldn't run for twelve days a year. Whenever there was a special occasion, a special foreign programme, they would replace the classical programme with this. So in a year, there may have been only six a year. Now I am interested in who practices classical music in Bangladesh as I myself am involved in music. But I have not seen a single classical programme on television in the last six months. When Wednesday comes I feel sure that there will be the programme, but it never comes. If they can keep in closed for six months, they can keep in closed for all times. Perhaps the parents are like the 13-year-old mother. There can be government controlled television. There can be television without government-control. And the good things on the government controlled channel will also be pointed out. There have to be guidelines of good parenting.

**Afzal Hossain:** I am an actor too. I was quite happy at one time to earn a living as an actor, doing nothing else. But in our time it was not possible. I have no regrets. I am happy. What I think is that our times and the present times are quite different. We all like to take the shortcut rather than to struggle. This is not our fault. In politics, literature, in all aspects this is true. As Jahangir bhai said, the papers are filled with who is getting married, who is doing what and such. It is not being said what is happening on television, what should be happening there. Even so, things are going ahead. It is the young who are doing these things. They who perhaps were no known before are now rising up through their work.

I am optimistic that despite all the obstacles, they will go forward. But we have to allow the field to expand. For this, the role to be adopted by the television must be highlighted. Why is only Daily Star doing this? Why aren't many forums growing like this? Just as we have had this discussion today, we want many more. This will bode well for all.

We have to think about the good things on television. For example, some time back during the floods, a journalist asked the television authorities why the package programmes weren't being run. They said that entertainment programmes were not being shown during this time. But, he pointed out, they were showing Sindbad, Robin Hood and such.

Such imported programmes are being bought with foreign currency, dubbed in Bengali, but not the Bengali you or I speak. They have five-minute commercial allocation. And someone from our own country sweats his guts out to make a programme, then has to wait in a serial for his turn. And there will be only one-and-a-half-minute time allocated for the sponsor. I can't think whose brainchild it is that an imported programme in distorted Bengali will be given a five-minute allocation for sponsors, while a local programme we are making, with our emotions, for only one minute and a half which certainly will not encourage sponsors. These must be written about.

I know that it makes no difference to the television authorities what Mahfuz Anam writes or doesn't write. But then, it does make a difference at times. Not only the television authorities, even the heads of government are affected. So we must write about these things. We want to save ourselves. Just as we grew up as orphan children, we don't want to be orphans any longer. Please come forward and save us.

**Mahfuz Anam:** I want to make some proposals in my concluding remarks. I feel, perhaps as a journalist, that certain things can be achieved by discussing problems and bringing these before public notice. This is an important function of a democratic society.

I feel that we do not speak out in many instances. Why can't we speak? We hesitate, but we must speak. I propose that those who are artists whose plays are held up due to certain dialogue, those who are advertisers who are facing problems regarding sponsors, those who are facing problems with package programmes because of short commercial space, why don't we shout out?

**Julfiqar Ahmed:** It is not just that they will give us only a minute and a half sponsorship time. They want programmes that have not been shown anywhere at all, absolutely new programmes. Yet they are importing old programmes. Programmes shown in Indian in Hindi are being shown here, bought cheap and dubbed in corrupted Bengali.

**Mahfuz Anam:** I will publish these things prominently in the Daily Star. I will treat them in the editorial in future. I will take initiative to get these things treated in other papers too. I want to propose that those of you who are involved in the television, artists, technicians, come, let us join hands and say, we want a change. We won't ask for something impossible. Take censorship laws for example. Let me publish them.

**Julfiqar Ahmed:** There is one thing I want on record. When we go to the sales department of Bangladesh Television, they have nothing written about the censorship laws and they can never show us these. Whenever we come up with something, they just say, no this won't do. The other day I had the phrase, 'a leading hotel' in one of my plays. They said this can't be used because it sounds like a particular hotel like Purbani or whatever. That is their way of thinking. Where are the laws? They can't show us. So if Bangladesh Television has any censorship laws, they should produce it. It should be open to all in public.

Another thing should go on record. The print media played a role in this matter of five-minute sponsor time. All this foreign media is getting coverage in the print media, wide coverage. We don't know how this gets such coverage. Our research shows that the cost of a 30-second ad is less than those who get the five-minute ad.

**Mahfuz Anam:** What I feel is that there are many issues that should come before the public. Let us make a big national conference on these issues. I will invite all newspapers. We will talk freely and will have this published in the paper.

**Golam Mustafa:** We have a lot of hope. We know that soon there is to be a private channel, private satellite programmes and such which are not government. If we have these five Bengali channels to watch, say BTv, the private channel, satellite channels, these will be a strong competition. A time will come that those operating cable networks will eventually drop BTv. So instead of looking to what BTv is or isn't doing, the programme makers should concentrate on the new channels.

**Mahfuz Anam:** But BTv is being run with our taxpayer's money. It can change with market competition, that's a different matter. What we have a right over it. It is a state-owned institute. We have to have a stand on it.

**Golam Mustafa:** I wanted to say that when BTv would receive the shock, it would be obliged to change its policy.

**Mahfuz Anam:** But we have a right to speak out about it. I look forward to your cooperation and thank you all once more.