

The YEP Forum Public Dialogue on Expectations from Our Tele Media

Organised by The young Entrepreneurs and The Professionals Forum in Collaboration with The Daily Star and The British Council

Among those who participated
Mustafa Monowar Media Specialist,
Aly Zaker, Actor & Director,
Saleem Al Deen, writer,
Muhammad Jahangir, Executive Director, Centre for Development Communication,
Fuad Chowdhury, Commissioning editor Ekushey television,
Afzal Hossain, chairman and Managing Director, Infra Private Limited,
Meghna Guha Thakurta, Chairperson International Relations DU,
Farah Kabir, Governance and Gender Advisor, The British Council,
Anisul Haque The Daily Protham Alo,
Faria Hossain Ananda Dhara,
Osama Tasser, Coordinator The YEP Forum,
Rafi Hossain, YEP Talk Incharge.

Continuation from last week

Mustafa Monowar: To elevate culture, All India Radio did not stop classical music programmes which it had been running for a long time. I heard that Nehru was told that nobody listens to classical music programmes and the time of this programme should be shortened. But Nehru said that this programme will be broadcast at prime time and the length of the programme will be increased. You have to go on listening to classical songs, continuously go on hearing. And the culture elevated today is the reason that people are hearing good songs.

That means audience has to be created. At first television and radio should go on giving the programmes continuously, good programmes. The audience will not accept it at first but will slowly take it. One of my experiments in the Television was 'Muktadhara', a discussion programme.

I should tell you in brief about how I first conceptualised the programme. The 'Insert' fever was on in television. Even in the song 'Ridoy amar nacher aijke, muiyurer moto nacher re', there was an insertion of a peacock. Do you need to show a peacock there? After that I realised that the situation of television is very bad. So, I decided that there will be no insertion. Everybody will just speak standing. It will be a really dull programme. I gave it to a producer, a learned producer and he said this is a dull programme. Even then he added some entertainment into it and I said 20 per cent people will see your programme. And he said, no sir it will be 30 per cent. Then I said that I want that five per cent people should see this programme. I told him see there had been preaching of so many religions but there was no video insertion, it was only good speakers. I said go get some good speakers. Ultimately this programme got the best journalist award.

We frequently talk about popular programmes. The responsibility of the national television should be to elevate culture. The programmes may not be popular in the beginning. Long term programmes should be taken up. People may not like it today but it will get popular after five years. It is surprising that long term planning is not there in our national television which is the worst flaw of our television.

Long term means experimenting. I will release the programme from today and will conduct the survey after three years. We run after immediate programme.

When its floods, we make instantaneous programmes on floods. Everything is instantaneous. Therefore, we are unable to identify our audience.

One more thing is this that any culture is elevated in two ways. One it comes up from the rural, from nature and goes up to a certain limit. It stays up to the folk level where there is enough emotion. It can be amusing, artistic and have many other elements but it does not rise above a certain level.

The other culture is which grows big through long term devotion and practice. We have to give that culture through our television. We are putting away that culture. We have taken it for granted that it will not be popular. Classical songs are no longer broadcast on Bangladesh Television. The most annoying songs to me is bad classical songs. I can bear everything but not ready to hear bad classical songs.

The other thing is selection. Whatever done, nothing is effective in the Television. Committees are made with renowned people. They talk big in the committee meetings and go away. Suggestions made in that way are not helpful.

Then who can do it. We are having problem with the word 'talent'. We have to bring talented people. Competent people, talented people from outside have not come in Television for a long time which has deteriorated the situation more. The main thing is we should get talented people. There are of course talented people otherwise how are good programmes being produced in the country. We have understood from the 'Nuton Kuri' that there is no dearth of talent in our country. The 'Nuton Kuri' was organised to search talents. So talent-hunting is very essential for any television.

Then there is another type of talent necessary for television but television does not want to take upper level talents. They like to take mediocre to avoid problems. This is in the case of all television.

The other problem is that we speak about democracy but do not believe in it. What do we understand about cultural democracy? I can see any drama. The drama can be focused on a minister, a government official. But have we seen one drama which is based on a government employee? We see dramas in television where officers and officers are portrayed but we don't understand what is the status of the officer shown in the drama.

We do not practice democracy. As a result the characters of dramas are becoming very limited.

I once released a drama based on a foreign story named 'Inspector General' and showed very prominently that it is translated and not based on our story. The next day I received a phone call from an highly influential and he asked me what have I shown. I said sir this cannot happen in our country, our police is very good. This is the story of another country and so I have broadcast it. Such things were done in the past.

We see in India that they are criticising the ministers, the prime ministers. We are surprised. Those who are praising it in our country will hinder when such things will happen here. So, we are not taking democratic attitude in case of television programmes. We are not taking it from any quarter. This is another huge problem.

Farah Kabir: Who created this culture?

Mustafa Monowar: Nobody created this culture. The culture is we are cowards. We were cowards during the Pakistan period. Even during the Pakistan time it was us who said that there is no harm if we do not listen to Rabindra Sangeet. There was a time when a 'peep' was not allowed on the forehead. This television culture that we will say nothing you just understand.

Another thing is that television should portray the current affairs as authentic as possible. If this is left out, many things will be left out. Even if we cannot say, we should make understand that this is the truth.

Like BBC, if it creeds government version it mentions that this is government information. BBC has its own version and says that government has said this. This democratic attitude has to be built up.

The situation has changed a little. Nobody will listen to the radio if the language is not Bangla. But this is not the case with television. You don't need Bangla in case of Television. Everybody, even me, will see if the programme is in Hindi or any other foreign language or if a girl is clad in a mini dress.

The producers of television are trying to compete with the numerous satellite channels. The things sold on the satellite channels are so costly and so well presented that we cannot compete with those. We have to go back to cultural programmes.

The situation is bound to change now. The audience will understand that we have to take a democratic attitude in programme. We have to make more programmes for minority viewers because one day these minority programmes will be the popular programmes.

People still remember the dramas of famous people like 'Rakta Karabi'. I am talking about my productions. I willingly kept all the dialogues of Rabindranath and did not edit them. There were very slight changes. This is national television and the drama has been written by Rabindranath, why should I edit it? So, this proves that it is possible. It is not true that people of our country do not like good programmes. There is problem if we try to find majority liking the programme or popularity.

I will finish with another example. BBC produces Shakespeare drama totally anew every eight or nine years.

Another example is that after the World War when American programmes had taken over the entire Japan and people did not see Japanese programmes NHK started 'Small Heroes'. They

We are very upset over the situation at Bangladesh Television. Will this situation continue? Viewers of BTV from different sectors have gathered here at the dialogue to discuss where this situation is leading us. As viewers, can we put pressure on the BTV which is run totally on taxpayers' money? Today's dialogue is aimed at finding out an effective way to put pressure on the BTV authorities.

brought in history of small heroes who had contributed to the culture and the war. In the beginning nobody used to see the programme and the rating was very low. But slowly after continuing for about seven to eight years the American programmes started decreasing.

Fuad Chowdhury: As commissioning editor of Ekushey Television what I am trying to do at present is execute the policy being developed. ETV is the first South Asian region to obtain permission to broadcast programmes through land transmission. This means 90 per cent of the people in Bangladesh will be viewing ETV when it starts. It will be like BTV which cover 96 per cent viewers.

It is a private sector. Audience survey has been conducted for two reasons. One, it has the maximum viewers.

The other thing is that there is a mandate that we will stress on three sectors. There will be of course prime time entertainment programmes. The news and current affairs analysis will be of one-and-a-half hour. News will be of nearly one hour and hopefully we will make it real news. Apart from news and current affairs there will be programmes on education and human rights issues. I have taken the responsibility of making these programme for the time being. And while performing this responsibility we have taken an outreach programme. What we are trying to do is to develop a series of programmes with NGOs and other community groups which will be issue based. We will make social issue based programmes which we will promote and show it to the people. Such an agenda has been taken. I have personally received about 200 proposals for such programmes. We have seriously evaluated these proposals and a line-up has been done that we will work close from conceptual level, to production and up to broadcast and one of the producers from the television would be involved as a line-producer with them. We are planning to hire line-producers in this context.

Even regarding news and current affairs, although it will be in-house production, but we have talked with environmental groups, some human rights groups to provide us news items. For example BELA and Phillip Gain's group. They have said that they will provide us with items on the research and other works they have been doing for the last 10 to 12 years which can be broadcast as news and feature items. So, we are trying to do that networking which never happened in Bangladesh television.

Another thing we experienced in our recruitment that about 13 boys and girls who have studied abroad on media have applied. They want to come home. You have to create the environment to come home. A working condition need to be created where they can come and work.

There are about 30 million adolescent children in Bangladesh, more than the Canadian population and if programmes can't be developed without addressing them. At first we thought that adolescent programmes mean programmes that deal with entertainment or 'message giving' through entertainment. But later we attended some workshops and realised that children can go down into depths. They talk so in-depth about growing up experience and sexuality that we are really surprised. So, we thought that no, not only songs and dances but you can go into more depths with them but for that you have to create the environment where people can come and participate. So we are going through a process. And we have so far some very young people from Jahangirnagar University, although it is a core group now and we are trying to develop it. So, as a role model it is something happening internally, within ourselves. It is absolutely open. It is not a government channel. Although it's a private channel and if we can open up and if we can increase participation it will get the popularity very quickly.

I recently had a meeting with someone who is very close to BNP and said that they will watch us for one week and we will be able to understand whether you are Awami League brand or not. Then if you are genuinely talking about participatory process, specially when election at any level comes, and you are open we will come to you. And if that happens I think there is an opportunity that we will fare. And Simon says one thing that if we become the spokesman of the government, tomorrow people will stone us and day after tomorrow they will set fire. And that is what is going to happen to ETV is we are not aware about this and sensitive about this. That process is on but it is a hard process.

Rafi Hossain: You have to telecast allegorically or symbolically.

Fuad Chowdhury: Why symbolically? Whatever is the fact, we will say. If an incident happens, we project the facts and let the audience judge it. Let the audience make their own judgement which they could tell today. And we don't have to go out of our way to show the facts.

Aly Zaker: I have got a question for Mr. Fuad. The question relates to democracy and you were talking about being democratic in presenting your news. I would like to relate democracy to religion.

Fuad Chowdhury: We were discussing about this that how far we can go with this actually? It will depend on the political sensitivity and leadership within the ETV. It depends on the policy makers. I am not a policy maker. They have to decide how secular they want to go and politically how sensitive they are.

Rafi Hossain: How are you affected by those legislation?

Fuad Chowdhury: As far as the agreements are concerned we have agreements with three ministries. One is the Information, the other Finance and lastly the Telecommunications Ministry. We are regularly dealing with these ministries because we have to go for uplink programme and whatever. As far as we are concerned, it has been okay to function independently.

Osama Tasser: Yes, you are entitled to function independently but the question was whether the censorship law is applicable for you or not?

Fuad Chowdhury: Freedom has been given but I cannot say about the parliamentary policy.

Osama Tasser: Secularism is also a big issue, but I think there are more priorities which have to be looked at.

Mohammad Jahangir: We hope that various political opinions will be reflected on ETV. This is our dream of private media. As long as this does not start, it will remain in our dreams and we will continue to hope for it. I am very hope towards ETV and I hope that ETV will be an open window in the present suffocating situation. But I am scared when I look at the political situation in Bangladesh. The political culture of Bangladesh fears the electronic media more than the print media. Look at the contradiction of the present or the immediate past government. They have provided 100 per cent freedom to the print media, but they are not ready to provide five per cent freedom to the electronic media. Even progressive party like Awami League is ready to the blame but will not compromise in the case of electronic media.

We don't expect even 25 per cent of the political debate as you can watch on 'India Question Hour', on BBC. Our electronic media cannot do that in the next few years. However, we are hopeful that ETV will definitely do that exercise.

Even with these apprehensions we are very hopefully looking towards ETV like we had hoped about our print media which they had fulfilled.

Faria Hossain: Let us come back to BTV. We of course have lot of expectations from ETV which we also had from ATN but did not get. Let us hope that ETV will not be like that.

In reference to Saleem Bhai's statement, I also say that there is much to expect from autonomy of the BTV because even in autonomy there will be somebody to make the decisions. There will be a set of people who will like the present set of people in BTV would make the decisions. Actually their attitude is very important towards programme centred audience.

Due to technological revolution over the last two or three years the demand of the audience has also changed. This has to be understood first.

Secondly, there was a question whether BTV at all has a policy or not. The four pillars of BTV are to motivate, to educate, to inform and to entertain. Regarding entertainment programme, the idea is vague. There is a feeling that there is something wrong in making an entertainment programme. Actually there is nothing wrong in it. After the day's work when I will sit in front of the Television I would like to be entertained.

Those who are sitting on the decision-makers chairs should control things with their talents and not through authority. Time has also changed and the demand for stars and popularity has come up. Actually BTV is not a victim, it is a convict and should be treated like that, it should be punished.

Afzal Hossain: I also don't want to consider BTV as a convict because I am indebted to BTV. It is not the fault of the Television for its today's situation. It is the fault of those who run it and the way they run it. I am also very hopeful about ETV, but we



don't want to part from BTV. Why should we? It is our television, our national media, run with our taxes. Can we find the reasons for the degradation of our television?

This is not true that one who is born in the USA can produce something of international standard and one who is born in Bangladesh cannot. Talent is a common thing. It does not in which of the worlds the person is born. One who has the talent can produce things of international standard. My teacher, Mustafa Monowar who is sitting beside me here, has received gold medal in all India painting exhibition. When he produced 'Rakta Karabi', Bangladesh Television had many limitations. Those limitations were overcome by talent. Talent can overcome technical limitation. There was a scene in the drama that a ray of light comes and falls on the hand which is very difficult. He had held the ray of light on the hands continuously. Today there would have been three dissolves and beautiful faces of the actresses just keep hold the audience.

Mustafa Monowar does puppet shows. I have also seen it elsewhere in the world but never felt that the standard in Bangladesh is in anyway less than those.

How has his talent been used? BBC does a children's puppet show and I think it is possible to produce such a programme in Bangladesh. But why is it not being done?

I believe that there is no dearth of talent in Bangladesh. The lack of application and please try to find out the reason. I think we still can keep bright contribution.

I also consider that popularity is not a problem. There are two sides of popularity. I am sorry that I have to mention one name. Tarun Majumdar is a popular Indian film maker and I think he creates audience. He has been for long creating audience of good films by which more serious film makers like Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray are being benefited. I consider that Tarun Majumdar has a contribution in going to watch films made by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritik Ghatak. I think they are creating a platform.

Mustafa Monowar said that it is not necessary that good production should be liked by everybody. I differ a little here. If we push away the majority of the people then it will be difficult to draw them near again.

For example Sheikh Niamat Ali makes a film and people don't go to see it. He says there is no audience for good films. In that case what Tarun Majumdar is doing is he is trying to make the film good, trying to say the story in a better way. Those trying to understand it deeply are getting it, those going for entertainment are also getting it.

Bad taste is not inside a person, it is being created. So, please stop creating bad taste.

Aly Zaker: Everybody has a different value for entertainment. Like I get entertained by dramas of Shakespeare while another person gets similarly entertained by seeing Delawar Jahan Jhontu's film. So, we can't say Shakespeare is not entertaining.

Fuad Chowdhury: What I am saying is that if we take an effort to create a new television culture, we will be able to know in five years time what changes have come and what people are waiting for this. News can be one of them.

Mohammad Jahangir: We have not discussed the means to overcome the situation as much as we discussed regarding the situation of the BTV. We have before us only one prescription on our table and that is the report of a committee for providing autonomy to BTV. No organisation who give out statement on culture, they had not organised any discussion of the autonomy report. There has been no serious discussion over the Autonomy Commission's report, not even in the newspapers. A portion of the report has been made public. The Information Ministry is reviewing the report but there has been no arrangement for reviewing it by the civil society. It would have been done, we would not have heard after two years that there is this flaw and that.

As we don't have any other prescription and the report of the Autonomy Commission is on the table we can help to rectify the flaws, as we don't have any way out. Those who say it is beyond repair, I request them to propose the way out of the government system and control.

The report said that the management will be accountable to the parliamentary committee only. It is very important. The new recruitment policy is also important. You can take in a guest producer for Taka 100,000 even without giving him regular appointment. It is in the new recruitment policy. If the management thinks that they will give a person like Mustafa Monowar Taka 100,000 for a production, they can. But the present BTV cannot do it.

The most important thing is the new approach or attitude. The new attitude which has come up in this discussion includes popular programmes, minority programmes, etc. All these are matters of how you look at it. Mustafa Monowar Bhai mentioned Muktadhara, my discussion programme on BTV. I had been told many times by BTV that people do not watch discussion programmes. I challenged the BTV authorities during the Ershad period that you allow me to do discussion programmes and it will beat the dramas. But the conditions would be that the topic will be mine and discussions of my choice. I still believe that if you give me freedom in selecting the topic and the discussants, people will not watch Subarna Mustafa's drama instead of it. I told the BTV that they were being unfair with me. A producer of a drama is free to choose Subarna or Aly Zaker for his drama but I don't enjoy the freedom to choose the discussants.

I had a list of 100 black-listed people. I couldn't take the best discussants but the drama producers could take the best actor or actress.

What next? I am suggesting an action plan. Much has been written about BTV. Now I am not interested anymore in these discussions. The action plan is that the civil society along with the artists should build up a movement in demand of the autonomy of the electronic media. I see no other alternative.

If there can be a movement for financial problems of package programmes then why can't there be movement for autonomy? I don't understand.

Through today's discussion I would appeal that the government hand over the television to an autonomous administration totally free from government control. The government is not doing so. Therefore, the civil society has to wage a movement and I think there is no scope of any more discussion on it.

Afzal Hossain: I think the package has created new opportunities. The technical assistance which we could not get earlier have developed here. This has helped us to think more and has given the scope to work in various areas. Another thing is that for the rise in remuneration the artists no longer have to be distressed at the old age, this is a good side.

Mustafa Monowar: When I heard 'package', it was a new word. Where did it come from? Actually the day we started television, package programmes started that day. Without package programmes television cannot run. It is not that television is running without package. The foreign productions are also part of package.

It is actually private production. The word package has created a wrong conception. It is very painful that we are thinking in the same line as the government does. The government thinks that good programmes can be made by making a committee and we are also thinking like that. Individual talents have to come up. Where is that base?

Committees will not help, neither will the idea of corporation if we are not being able to take individual talents, identify individual talents. So another person or group of people will be needed to identify and project talents.

Our television starts with audio. 'Dhanna Dhanney Pushpe Bhara', it was the decision of three of us, me and other two. We did not discuss it with any other person. These things cannot be done by forming committees. However, one process is needed. If we want to stress on something, it should be the democratic process.

Afzal Hossain: The matter of the sufferings of the audience was raised here. How many of the audience feel the same as we in the profession? How many of the audience can be brought into this movement? Will the audience group take to the streets for this movement?

Aly Zaker: The discussion for which we sat here today was BTV. We will leave ETV alone, we will leave ATN alone, we will leave other channel alone. We should decide what can we do about BTV?

From this forum we should raise a demand in all kinds of media that the report of the Commission on Autonomy be made public.

The second thing is that we have to analyse this report and identify the flaws in it. I am of the same opinion as Jahangir that a movement has to be waged in this regard, but the movement has to be very constructive.

We should first prepare a working paper after scrutinising that particular report. This working paper should have the guideline that what are the flaws which should be omitted, which are the points left out and should be included. We should also bring into the discussion agenda about matters like that of the third class and fourth class employees if it is an hindrance.

Rafi Hossain: From today's discussion, can we expect all of yours strong participation, if we go into this movement?

Aly Zaker: Absolutely. I promise. The guideline of the autonomy should be examined and make a document on which we can go for action. Two things may come up here as Saleem has said. We might end up two officially-owned television channels. One will be an autonomous channel with open programmes and the other wholly-owned government channel which will be there for government messages and propaganda. I don't know whether it will be technically possible or not. I have total support for the movement and will be with it.

Anisul Hoque: The autonomy should be materialised as soon as possible and we should see that it is not delayed for the examining.

Rafi Hossain: How much your Daily News paper will contribute to it?

Anisul Hoque: I have personally written many times on this and will continue to do so. The newspapers has to play a big role and Prothom Alo will definitely be there. And as Jahangir Bhai said that the demands for package programmes were met when all the artists came down together, why can't the artists get united for the movement autonomy. If all the artists and journalists are together in the movement it is possible.

Saleem Al Deen: I am announcing my solidarity with the movement from this meeting and I am in this platform.

Meghna Guha Thakurta: I am in the movement, you don't worry. I think the artists & journalist can effective do this movement because they have pen in their hands, they have the drama. The way they can build up the movement, a political group cannot. But we should search for the channels, the channels where to go and what to do.

One thing remains and that is the individual talent versus organisation. There are many artists who want to work individually. I have found in many forums that there are individuals who do not want to go into organisational things. But you need to go through organisational matter in doing a telefilm. It is not possible to make a telefilm alone. A team work is necessary for it.

I have mentioned technology time and again. Technology should be democratised in one sense. An infrastructure is necessary so that the technology can be in every body's hand. The guarantee should be there.

Even if we don't go for autonomy, we have to put pressure to remove the obstructions in recruitment of individual talents. We also have to put pressure for maintaining the criteria in selecting artists.

Mustafa Monowar: There is no proven way to run this organisation. I think, it will be best if it is governed culturally.

I have said that technology is a very minor thing in television. If you have money you can import technology today but you talent resources and other cultural inputs are matters of hundreds of years of practice. Technology is a very easy thing which can be obtained in seven days time. It is not that development of technology has improved the standard of our dramas. Has dramas improved by shooting on video cameras? No, not at all. Therefore, we have to take steps to elevate culture and long-term planning.

Farah Kabir: I have got suggestions at two levels. One is if our artists, involved here for long, can take an advocacy strategy. We always point fingers at others but we forget that the other finger is pointed towards ourselves. So, we are also responsible for this.

We have for long said that this and this have not happened but we did not provide any alternatives. Maybe we can have a dialogue or discussion to find out the alternatives and list them and then, as a memorandum, take it to the government.

The problem with the autonomy report is that, although it is a fantastic document but it is not a working document. You will find that by the portions published it proves that it is a very beautiful documents but I am not sure how to translate that into operation.

All the issues have to come. You have to take the issues like the employment policy. Whether it is class three, class four, cameraman or director, it has to come because it affects them.

So, when we make a suggestion can we do it in a practical basis, how to translate it. The options given in the report are not all workable. Like there is option that you can stay in the corporation or the government. How can one institution, one structure have both. It cannot, it does not work. What we can have is two channels. It is a little unrealistic if you go into the details.

It will be more effective if somewhere here is commissioned or volunteers to study it in details how to translate it into an implementation document. And we will collaborate with the state, not necessarily that we have to take positions. We might come up with some suggestions to translate it into action.

My request to YEP is to see if we can have a series of dialogues. We could not focus one particular issue. We are talking about standard and quality, we are talking about recruitment, we are talking about training, we are talking about creativity. So, we are really talking about a lot of issues. You cannot have anything concrete if you do one dialogue and leave it there.

Instead of looking at the back or what the problem is, can we move forward?

They have all committed. So, we can take their suggestions that how we can have constructive dialogues. Next time we structure it and then we have a focus discussion. And at the end let us compile it. Let us not under estimate the audience.

One more thing we have seen which did not come in discussion today, is the presentation of news and current affairs. But at one point this has to come too.

So you can have few themes with suggestions from the seniors. Let them come up with the dates they are available and then we can have the dialogue. In the meantime you go back to the audience and mobilise them.

Osama Tasser: My personal opinion was that our intention to hold the dialogues is to integrate the young people in the nation building. This is one of our main agenda.

Another thing is that we ourselves are not trying to talk big. We are trying to know the problems and expectations from you, from the respective professionals. I am once again grateful to you all for joining this discussion.