that producers in broadcast media should maintain full records of all news bulletins, and recordings of all other programmes related to the election, including party election broadcast (if any) for reference in case of any complaint or dispute at least for two months." So that anybody being affected by the comments of news analysis programmes and talk shows can take legal actions," he says.

Being critical about the talk shows and programmes that annalyse news and are frequently aired in different private TV channels, Muhammad Jahangir says, "The guests of the programmes act like reformists. Is it logical that one person for 15/20 minutes should deliver sweeping comments accusing others? And the accused never gets any chance to defend themselves. It does not follow the ethics of journalism. Who will be responsible if any guest of the talk shows deliberately gives wrong information and politically biased comments in the talk shows? So it should be monitored properly."

An attempt to impose a 'code of conduct' for the media while covering elections was shot down by irate journalists and media personalities on the ground that it contained too many contradictions.

"And even in most of the talk shows we see the same faces repeatedly and sometimes both of the participants of the talk shows belong to same alliances. In fact, sometimes I feel we are forgetting balanced journalism. The accused never get any chance to defend themselves in these talk shows," he adds.

Shykh Seraj, director and head of news of Channel-i, also admits that there should be some guidelines for private TV channels. However, he rejects the notion that there are many complaints against the electronic media. But he admits that self-censorship does not always work properly. "If a journalist is fascinated with a party, s/he may consider a report neutral but, it may be appeared biased to others. So, there must be some guidelines for electronic media and channels must follow it. The guideline will not only ensure our journalistic freedom, it will also safeguard us from the interference of other 'sensitive agencies'. Moreover, it will definitely ensure accountability of the TV channels," he says.

"But, private TV channels have mature over the years compared to previous election experiences. We've not yet done anything that can be labelled as 'media coup'," he says.

Shykh Seraj also claims that reporters must maintain balance in the coverage of candidates and political parties. A particular candidate and political party should not be given substantially more coverage than another.

"Guests of talk shows are briefed properly not to take advantage of the programmes to carry out their personal vendetta against rivals," he adds.

Shykh Seraj believes that there is possibility of 'disaster' because of competition amongst the mass media during the election result coverage. "Every channel will try to draw the attention of the viewers. If all the channels give similar data and one channel gives even advanced result, though not credible one, people will be after the channel. In that case self-censorship may not work properly. Sometimes it's difficult to follow ethics because of competition."

But, Shykh Seraj claims because of political connections, if any channel gives support to any particular party during the election the government should not interfere unless they commit any major offence. "The government should have considered this while giving licenses."

About the duty to make corrections, Shykh Seraj says, "It's not possible to give rejoinders of the reports in TV channels. We have to broadcast news every hour, so there is possibility of minor mistakes. And I've not seen it practiced in other countries."

But, rejecting his comment Muhammad Jahangir says, "A mechanism should be created to give rejoinders. It's also done by the BBC and other broadcasting companies abroad."

But, the media personalities are in a dilemma in case of carrying paid political advertisements. Political parties in most of the countries in the world buy slots in TV channels and broadcast their propaganda during the election campaigns. ATN Bangla will provide such slots for political parties, however, Channel-i will not do it.

About this, Shykh Seraj says, "Such programmes are broadcasted in many countries of the world. But, to me it should be avoided since democratic practice in our country has not yet reached that point that a party will tolerate if any media gives support to a particular party. If it's done there is every possibility of facing problems."

"What's wrong if a TV channel allows a party to give advertisements during the election?" asks Saiful Bari. "It's my business policy. One can't dictate my internal policy unless I do anything against the sovereignty of the country or distort facts. It's quite obvious that channels owned by a political leader or a business man affiliated with a particular political party will play a partisan role during the election," says Saiful Bari.

Moreover, it is expected that the government enacts a comprehensive act for giving license to launch private TV channels, since there are about 150 applications seeking license. It should also review the license process of the existing TV channels. Meanwhile, the people demand that overcoming all limitations, the mass media in Bangladesh will reach a state of maturity so that it can play an effective role not only during the elections but also through constructive criticism of the government and help the country to go forward. ■