



Fruitful or Empty talks: Analyzing political talk shows before the national election of Bangladesh



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Abstract

Talk shows especially political talk shows are very popular in Bangladesh. Just before the national election of 2018, political talk shows were undoubtedly important in shaping public opinion and establishing political discourses. This research took that time period into consideration to understand the role talk show has played in that extremely intimidating political environment. The research aims to identify the commodifying nature of Bangladeshi television talk shows and explores the political talk shows of that time to understand the way talk shows dealt with politics. For this, the research utilizes a qualitative method employing a textual analysis of the talk shows. The research found political talk shows less concerned about constructive discussions and more concerned about lucrative presentations and sponsor demands. Arguments are appreciated more than reaching an agreement. This research concludes finding politics extremely commodified through political talk shows and recommended seeking solutions rather than just addressing problems.

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1 Introduction

The media industry of Bangladesh is expanding day by day. This expansion is so much visible that it has become one of the fastest-growing media markets in the world (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). Currently, there are 37 television channels broadcasting fully from the country's first satellite Bangabandhu-1 (Islam, 2020). With an increasing number of channels, there is an increasing number of programs especially talk shows. In recent years, television channels are focusing on producing different types of talk shows like political, contemporary issue-based, celebrity-oriented, etc. Especially political talk show genre is very popular among the mass people of Bangladesh. Although political mobility is very low, politics is to be seen discussed everywhere (Daily Star, 2019).

Political talk shows are very important "to get more insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality" (Dijk, 1993). This study is focused on political talk shows just before the national election of 2018, one of the crucial time periods in the history of Bangladesh. With strictly monitored cyberspace and controlled mass media, Hasina's government, at that time created such an environment where international media like DW warned popular TV host Zillur Rahman and Nobonita Chowdhury to speak carefully in talk shows (DW, 2018). The situation was so intensifying that the publisher of one of the prominent English national dailies of Bangladesh, Mainul Hossain, was arrested to call a journalist 'Characterless' in a talk show accusing him of supporting the political opposition by saying so (Daily Star, 2018). So, this time period is very crucial in our country concerning freedom of speech, especially in the Media. However insufficient attention has been given on broadcasted talk shows of that time. This study is focused on that time period, especially on what was the role of political talk shows prior to the national election of 2018. Whether they worked on shaping the political culture or were busy surviving by commodifying inside an extremely intimidating environment is the prime area of interest in this study.

Background of the study

Although being popular among audiences, political talk shows can hardly talk 'politics' in true sense. Most of the channels are regulated by the government-funded Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory committee (BTRC) under the telecommunication act of 2001. So, they can regulate the program of any private channel legally. It is not a new thing in our country. In 2008, the caretaker government of Bangladesh asked to stop all sorts of political live talk shows (Daily Star, 2008). In 2014, Ekushe television got a fax message to stop broadcasting one of its live political talk shows. They got permission afterward on nine-point conditions to broadcast it again (Daily Star, 2015). In 2018 as well, the digital security act strictly monitored all sorts of digital platforms prior to the election which was hugely criticized by international media (DW, 2108). In such a situation, political talk shows are stepping back from their actual role of shaping public opinion and inclining more on commercialization to ensure their survival. Sponsors decide who will be the host (based on popularity) and who will be the guest (Arman & Karim, 2017).

This raises the question if the politics discussed in the shows had itself become a commodity of the communication marketplace? This study is focused on such a time period when political talk shows got the highest viewership as the national election was knocking the door. This research aims to find the answer by exploring the political talk shows broadcasted prior to the national election of 2018.

History of talk-show:

The talk show is a type of television talk that is unscripted but structural conversation directed to the audience. According to Timberg & Erler (2010), a talk show must meet four principles where it is a broadcast commodity, anchored by a host, maintains the illusion of the present and appears to be spontaneous albeit being highly structured.

There are different notions about the starting point of television talk show history. Talk shows are introduced in television by the renowned talk personalities of radio programs like Edward R. Murrow, Arthur Godfrey, Dave Garroway, Arlene Francis, Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Mike Wallace (Timberg & Erler, 2010; Zambrano et al., 2018). Islam (2017) and Haque (2015), stated Joe Franklin's talk show of 1951 as the first-ever talk show

of the world. On the other hand, Khan (2015), introduces 'The Late-Night Show' of 1950 in Ireland as the first television talk show of the world and Joe Franklin's show as the first talk show in America. Timberg & Erler (2010), divides the history of talk show into five cycles from 1948 to 2000. In Bangladesh, according to Abedin (2015), the first television talk show was telecasted in Channel I on 3rd August 2001 featuring 'A Young Man with Innovative Ideas' and anchored by Zillur Rahman. But Haque (2015), identifies 'Ekusher Rat' as the first talk show of Bangladesh, telecasted in Ekushey Television in 2000. Very few scholarly literatures are available which discusses Bangladeshi television talk shows. No literature is found which thoroughly discusses every type of talk show in Bangladesh. Haque (2015), stated that, in most of the cases, topics of the talk show in Bangladesh circle around the current events and socio-political arguments; but talk shows also feature economic, cultural, entertainment, environment, health, education, games, and international issues.

Literature review

Talk shows can be understood from the political-economic aspect. Sharma (2015), observes the high interest of Bangladeshi television channels in broadcasting talk shows as it needs less labor and little investment and provides high profits. She tried to understand the power relations work around the talk shows. She found the topics of the talk show mostly depend on the interests of the owners of the television channels, sponsors and powerful groups related to the program. As a result, the selected topics work in a way that puts a veil over the main problems of society. Channels invite guests for the shows who are renowned and powerful and thus maintain relations with the political parties in power.

Few kinds of literature focus only on the political talk shows in Bangladesh. Sarkar & Bosri (2017), found 93% viewers of Bangladesh watch television talk show where 86% are of age 20-30 years. Most of these audiences think talk shows can provide enough information to the stakeholders but only discussions are unable to solve problems. On the other hand, some scholars found a huge influence of talk shows on audiences in making public discourse (Sarkar & Bosri, 2017; Dalal & Sharma, 2016).

Islam (2017), found that most of the audience think political talk shows as just a platform of power dominance between the government and opposition parties and these shows cannot answer to public queries of the reasons and solutions of the socio-political problems. Again, politicians cannot deliver anything to create political awareness among the audience. According to him, though politicians try to manipulate people into getting the vote, government and opposition parties are not able to convince people about their agendas through political talk shows. Moreover, political talk shows had never become able to make conscious movement on the young generation and failed to create a platform of communication between the government and the public.

Marjan (2015), discovered that the producers of the talk show select strong and vocal guests from their own ideology and weak guests from the opponent ideology where moderators control the talk shows at their will. They conclude that talk shows with their agenda-setting and awareness creating capability help viewers to analyze the political environment. Sharma (2015), adds that a group of teachers and journalists who are actually the supporters of different political parties, try to introduce themselves as intellectuals by just appearing in talk shows. They lack real knowledge, experience, and efficiency. Again, anchors are more focused on how they look rather than anchoring.

All these findings by the researchers refer to the commodity nature of the talk shows. According to Quail *et al.* (2005), television talk show programs exist as marketable commodities that are bought and sold in the communications marketplace. They understand talk shows as media products and discuss how talk show is commodified with its content, audience, and labor. After reviewing existing literature, it is found that this literature makes the ground for this research to understand talk shows from the perspective of the commodity. But, no scholarly article shows how political talk shows in Bangladesh work to commodify politics from the commodification perspective. Considering this research gap in consideration, this study focuses especially on a political talk show in relation to the concept of commodification.

Objectives of the Study

As the role of political talk shows of Bangladesh has been questioned by many scholars and intellectuals, the main objective of the study is to explore understanding politics as a commodified product through the political

talk shows. Through visual analysis, this study has explored the content, audience, and labor of three prominent political talk shows.

Research questions

The main research question of this study is: How does the political talk show in Bangladesh work to commodify politics? To find the answer to the prime question, following sub-questions has been taken into consideration:

- a) Are constructive discussions present in these talk shows?
- b) How much commercialized are these talk shows?
- c) How the commodification of content, labor, and audience are happening inside these talk shows?

Theoretical framework

The research uses the concept of commodification to understand talk show as the commodity and commodifying tool. Mosco (1996), defines commodification as the process of transforming use values into exchange values. Karl Marx found commodity as the most explicit representation of capitalist production. Mosco explains the commodity form in communication through the commodification of content, audience, and labor (pp. 133-141). The process of commodification of content involves transforming messages, ranging from bits of data to systems of meaningful thought, into marketable products where the wage laborer sells her labor power to make the content for a wage (p. 133). Citing Dallas Smythe, Mosco introduces the audience as the primary commodity of the mass media where media companies produce audiences by attracting them with media programming and deliver them to advertisers. He argues that labor is constituted out of the unity of conception or the power of execution. Capital works to separate conception from execution in the process of commodification. It reconstitutes the labor process which helps to correspond to the distribution of skills and power at the point of production (p. 139).

Quail *et al.* (2005), explained the commodification of content, audience, and labor in talk shows which harmonizes with Mosco (1996), understanding of the commodity form in communication. According to them, the filmed spectacle or the program includes three types of commodities: information, confrontation, and celebrities. Many talk show episodes center around the commodification of useful information to get a better consumer. Again, confrontation of a problem or an issue by the participants in the center of interest of the audience and the participating celebrities and their lifestyles engage audiences and thus are commodified. The produced show appears with some kinds of problems/ clashes deliberately to attract the audience. Intertexts are created as products and texts combine in such a way that text, intertext, and audiences are simultaneously commodity, product line and consumer (p. 31). Also, advertisers buy access to audiences where media sell audiences and make profits. Finally, as the nature of all capitalist institutions and organizations, talk show programs also exploit labor where laborers work longer hours for the same or less pay and relative refers to the intensified labor which means workers complete more work in the same or less amount of time. Talk shows sometimes also include improved exploitation as the studio audiences and the guests appear for free (p. 43).

2 Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative approach. Three political talk shows telecasted in three different television channels on a particular date (24 September 2018) are selected randomly for textual analysis where the topics of all the talk shows are almost the same based on a central theme. All three video footages were collected from YouTube Analysis of the videos of the talk shows is done following the process described in the section 'The Commodification of Talk Show Culture' of the book 'Vulture Culture: The Politics and Pedagogy of Daytime Television Talk Shows' by Quail *et al.* (2005). The combined result of these two phrases helped to find out the ways political talk show in Bangladesh working to commodify politics.

3 Results and Discussions

Visual Analysis of the Talk Shows

Three television talk shows featuring political topics are analyzed.

Theme and Background of the Talk Shows

All the three television talk shows selected, discussed the same theme, the national consensus process against the ruling government which was going on in the time period of the research (September 2018). The proposed national consensus had five principal claims; a neutral government in the time of the election, reorganization of the Election Commission, a fair and neutral environment for election, dissolving parliament before the announcement of the election schedule and the release of BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. The guests with the moderation of the anchor of the show presented their thoughts on this theme and discussed the political environment of the country.

Program Outline

Show Name: Tritiyo Matra
Channel: Channel I
Anchor: Zillur Rahman
Topic: About national consensus
Duration: 57:06 Min
Date: 24th September 2018

Guests:

1. Professor Apu Ukil
General Secretary, Awami Youth Women League
2. Wadud Bhuiyan
Former MP, Chittagong
Bangladesh Nationalist Party

Analysis

The program (Channel I shows, 2018) was set in a large space where the anchor sat in the middle of the table with the two guests on his two sides. In the background, there were three large digital screens. In the middle screen, static photos of different news events were being shown. The other two screens were showing logos of four private companies – Ifad Water, Ashok Leyland, KAI Aluminium, Bestway Group, one after another. The content of the program here gives information about the topic where two guests of the different ideologies confront each other with their arguments.

The guests were two prominent persons of two parties who are known by the audience. Thus information, confrontation, and celebrities made the spectacle of the program. Again, the problem revolving around the process of national consensus process is the topic of discussion where the guest from national consensus tried to legitimate the process but the guest representing the government tried to confront that legitimation with her arguments. Apu Ukil from the government also reads news from an online newspaper for the support of her arguments which also can be understood from the perspective of intertextuality. The program content was thus commodified through the commodification of the program spectacle, problem and intertexts as these strategies worked to attract the audience.

As mentioned before, the logos of the four sponsor companies were popping up on the screens which also work as an advertisement for them. Again, on the table, a half-liter bottle of IFAD water was kept in front of the guests and the anchor. Whenever someone is shone in a close shot, the audience finds the name of the water bottle visible-Ifad Water. All these are nothing but product marketing. Again, the guests participated in the show, are politicians of the two most prominent political parties. Their arguments in favor of their parties

were enjoyable to watch, but there was no constructive discussion to influence the audience in the political sphere for the vote and for the legitimation of the politico-economic system.

Again, huge labor worked behind the program for lighting, camera operation, set making, studio facilities and others, though we did not watch them. Labor is commodified here as it was gained in exchange for wages. The talk show discussed circling around the problem stated above but in the end, no solution came out. The audience was invited to enjoy the conflict between the guests and in the end, the anchor left it to the audience to think about the problem.

Program Outline

Show Name: Rajkahon

Channel: DBC

Anchor: Nobonita Chowdhury

Topic: What will happen with this consensus?

Duration: 36:52 Min

Date: 24th September 2018

Guests:

1. Mohammad Tajul Islam MP (Bangladesh Awami League)
President of Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources
2. Barrister Andaleeve Rahman Partho
Chairman, Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP)
3. Advocate Subrata Chowdhury
Executive President, Ganoforam

Analysis:

The spectacle of the program (DBC, 2018) was quite different and attractive than other talk shows. In a large set, the anchor at first read the news related to the topic from a distant part of the discussion place which established the background for the discussion. After that, she introduced the guests, walked closer to them, sat in the chair and started the discussion. In the background there passed the name of the program and the sponsor on a digital screen. The program gave information about the then situation of the political sphere, made the guests confront the issues. Invited guests are known by most of the audiences as they are leaders of the political parties which gave them an image of a celebrity. This lucrative spectacle and the starting thus worked to attract audiences much to this program. Again, the guests stated that a national crisis is revolving around the process of election which is presented as the problem in the program, that is why there started a process of national consensus with most of the political parties against the government. But with the discussion of the guests where Andaleeve Rahman Partho and Subrata Chowdhury discuss the problem and Mohammad Tajul Islam continuously denies their notion, till the last minute of the program they cannot reach an agreement. At 19:01 minutes, there happened a conflict between the anchor and Subrata Chowdhury. The anchor was highly aggressive so as the guest. But this high point can be seen as a policy of the show which helps to create interest among the audience about the show.

Such political problems are commodified here which kept the audience attached to the program but no solution came out. Moreover, there is seen intertextuality as the anchor reads questions and comments from Facebook and passes to the guests for the answers. She also reads news from BBC Bangla in the program. With quoting from other media this program again attaches the audience.

The program is sponsored by Shah Cement and the image and logo of the company were shown on the behind screen. With the two commercial breaks in the program, and using this strategy, advertisers bought access to the audiences. Again, with the arguments, the guests tried to motivate audiences towards their ideologies-Tajul Islam towards government and two others towards anti-government.

In the case of labor, we did not see the people behind the program but there was a whole unit of workers like the light man, camera person, studio assistant and others who served their expertise in exchange for a minimum wage. With all these, the talk show discussed the trending political problem around the election, but

no solution came out of it and the audience got no answer to the topic question- What will happen with this consensus? Audiences are attracted to the aforementioned strategies, to enjoy the conflicts between the two opposing political ideologies.

Program Outline

Show Name: Ajker Bangladesh
Channel: Independent Television
Anchor: Zahid Hossain
Topic: Consensus Policy
Duration: 47:57 Min
Date: 24th September 2018

Guests:

1. B M Muzammel Haque
Organizing Secretary, Awami League
2. Habibur Rahman Habib
Advisor of BNP Chairperson, Bangladesh Nationalist Party
3. A T U Taj Rahman
Presidium Member, Jatiya Party

Analysis:

A lucrative set where anchor sat at one side and the guests at his right side in the show (Independent TV, 2018). There were two different digital screens behind the table showing different graphics. At first, the anchor provided information about the show that it would try to understand the consensus, policies the parties will take for it and the reaction of the government from the guests. Participants were well-known members of the three prominent parties and they all the time confronted their opposing ideologies. The show spectacle thus worked in the show to attach the audience to the program. The problem in the show was around the theme 'National Consensus'. Guests from BNP and Jatiya Party said that most of the political parties in Bangladesh except the Awami League made this consensus. But the guest from Awami League, who was representing the government argued that no consensus is possible without Awami League as it is the most prominent political party of the country. This problem worked to hook the audience and thus the content of the show became commodified.

The show was sponsored by Rin Detergent Powder and the logo of the company was popping up on the screen behind the guests and also on the television screen. There were two commercial breaks and with this advertising, the access to the audience was bought by the advertisers. Guests from different political parties tried to explain their ideologies to reaffirm the audiences in the legitimation of the existing political-economic situation.

Labor force worked behind the program to make the program possible in exchange for the wages which helped the program to attract the audiences. Same as other talk shows, this show also could not give a proper solution to the portrayed problem but the conflict of political ideologies among the guests from different parties was the key attraction here which is portrayed as a commodity to sell to the audiences.

4 Conclusion

Utilizing Mosco's (1996) concept of commodification, the research shows that politics has been commodified through the political talk shows by the commodification of talk show content, audience, and labor. Rather than creating a public sphere, all three talk shows were busier in lucrative presentations and giving ample space to argue. Most of the time, when the discussion was on, the host took commercial breaks abruptly due to sponsor demand by absolutely breaking the flow of conversations. It has been seen that most of the time, guests and host himself/herself literary struggled to get the flow again. Also, all three talk shows end without reaching an

agreement. This clearly shows that the main focus of these talk shows is more on somehow passing the allotted time rather than having a constructive discussion.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the recommendations are as follows:

- a) Political talk shows should focus more on finding solutions to the existing political problems.
- b) Rather than just protecting own ideologies, the speakers of the talk shows should be more factual and neutral.
- c) Guests or speakers in the talk shows should be selected neutrally for a fair discussion.
- d) Anchors of the shows should be neutral and focus more on the outcomes of the discussion rather than merely presenting themselves as celebrities.
- e) Talk shows should focus on providing more information about the political condition of the country and making the audience aware and active about political issues.
- f) Talk show producers should focus on the welfare of the laborers lie behind the shows.

Political Talk shows should work to lift the veil of the false consciousness and give the actual representation of the political environment.



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