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Research Notes

Twenty-three Years of Programming of Bangladesh Television (1966–89)

Ali Riaz

This study analyses the structure of programmes of the Bangladesh Television (BTV) broadcast over a period of 23 years (1966–89). It presents an analysis of programmes of ten different time-points, and determines the changes over this time period. The ratio of imported and domestic programmes in Bangladesh Television is also studied. One of the findings of this study is that television in Bangladesh is used predominantly as a medium of entertainment since its inception in 1964 and is still being treated as such. Despite phenomenal development in the technical facilities, its structure of programmes remains almost the same. This study also reveals that Bangladesh Television is still dependent upon imported programmes to a large extent to feed its transmission hour.

The existing literature on television programming, though prolific, is deficient in several areas, including lack of longitudinal studies of television programming of a given station. Most studies that attempted to analyse the structure of programmes are based on a sample of programmes at one point in time, which evidently fails to provide a comprehensive picture of the structure of programmes as it runs the risk of not being entirely representative of programming. This situation also leads to potentially incorrect inferences concerning the structure of programmes and fails to provide trends over time. To date, most extensive statistics about television programmes—both in terms of structure of programmes and flow of television programmes—is compiled by Unesco in 'World Communication Report' (Unesco, 1989). Although it has not covered all the countries (for example, Bangladesh), it provides a comprehensive picture as it has analysed data of a complete year. Two earlier studies of Unesco on television programming—one in

1972-3 (Unesco, 1974), and the other in 1983 (Unesco, 1985) fell short of this quality. The former analysed programmes of a week and the sample of the latter study was of two weeks only. But, all these studies clearly lack an important aspect—they have not presented trends of television programming of a given country (or station) over a period of time. Studies that dealt with a given country also suffer the same limitation.

This flaw can also be found in the studies concerning the global free flow of information, which led to a debate about New International Information Order (NIIO) in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Empirical studies attempted to document the imbalance of flow between the Third World and the First/Second World paid little attention to television programming in the first place. Additionally, they limited themselves to a given point in time. Among the studies that included television programming in their bid to empirically substantiate the demand for New International Information Order Unesco (1974) study is prominent. Yet, as we mentioned earlier, it has overlooked the necessity of a longitudinal study. Varis (1986), however, reviewed the situation ten years later. Yet, he failed to overcome the weakness.

Having considered these lacunae, the present study attempts to analyse the structure of programmes of the Bangladesh Television (BTV) broadcast over the period of 1966-89. In addition to the analysis of programmes of ten different points in time, it was our purpose to determine the changes over this time period. This study also sought to analyse the ratio of imported and domestic programmes in Bangladesh Television.

A brief history of Bangladesh Television emphasizing the infrastructural development has been presented at the beginning to familiarize the readers with BTV and understand the rationale of the sample of the study.

■ **Brief History of BTV**

Bangladesh Television first aired its programme on 25 December 1964. At that time Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan and the station was built in Dhaka—the provincial capital. The television station started functioning with minimum technical facilities: two cameras, two television projectors, a transmitter of 300 watts and a studio of 924 square feet. Initially the transmitting range of the station was only 12 radius miles and average broadcasting time was three and a half hours daily and six days a week. With gradual development of the technical facilities in the subsequent years, average broadcasting time was raised to four and a half hours in 1970.

Following the liberation war of Bangladesh, the government took control of the BTV in 1972. Consequently, broadcasting hours were increased to seven days a week. The year 1975 is a watershed in the history of the Bangladesh Television. The BTV moved into its own building with all modern technical facilities including microwave reception which enables BTV to receive telecast materials directly from satellites through an earth station. By the end of 1978 four relay stations were built and through these relay stations 65 per cent of the population of Bangladesh have been brought under the transmitting range of BTV. Two more relay stations were added to these by the following year which eventually raised the potential number of viewers to almost 70 per cent of the total population. Along with these technical developments BTV raised its average broadcasting to seven hours a day.

The year 1980 is an important and remarkable year in the history of Bangladesh Television, for BTV added an one hour morning session to its seven hour evening session, a second channel which broadcast three hours of programmes daily and entered into the age of colour transmission. In the following year by increasing its morning session to three hours a day BTV's average broadcasting hour per day reached 16 hours—the highest broadcasting time to date. A remarkable development in the programming sphere of BTV in 1981 was setting up an Educational Television Cell. This cell was entrusted with the responsibility of producing curriculum-based television programmes.

This gradual development of BTV came to a halt in 1982 following the promulgation of the third Martial Law in the country. Under an austerity drive the government decided to discontinue BTV's morning session and the second channel, thus reducing the average broadcasting to seven hours daily. The government, however, continued with the programme of establishing relay stations to widen the transmitting range of BTV so that 100 per cent of the population can have the opportunity of viewing television. By 1983, four more relay stations were established that enabled the BTV to reach almost 100 per cent of the population. Total broadcasting hours was also increased by three hours weekly through an extended session on Friday afternoons. In 1989 BTV reintroduced a morning session once a week for four hours.

■ Method of the Study

The primary research method used to gather information about the structure of television programming on Bangladesh Television was content analysis. Most of the descriptions of the programme-content were derived from the programme cue-sheets available in Bangladesh

Television archives, television guides published by BTV and television programmes published in the national dailies. However, some data were gathered from videotapes.

Purposive sampling method was followed due to the large universe of this study. Programmes of ten weeks were selected for the present study. In view of the gradual changes of Bangladesh Television over 23 years attempts were made to make the sample as representational as possible. The weeks selected for the purpose of this study were: 1-7 May 1966, 3-9 November 1970, 26 December 1973-1 January 1974, 12-18 January 1974, 1-7 November 1975, 1-7 March 1976, 13-19 May 1978, 16-22 March 1981, 1-7 July 1985, 21-27 January 1989. First two weeks cover the pre-independence period. The year 1966 represents the initial years of television programming in Bangladesh while the year 1970 represents the last 'normal' year under a Pakistani regime. As the first general election of Pakistan, held in December 1970, approached the content of the then-Pakistan Television, Dhaka station changed remarkably. Political messages including speeches of different party leaders dominated the content of television programmes since mid-November. Three months after the election a civil war broke out that led to the independence of Bangladesh.

The third and fourth weeks sampled for the study represent the period when BTV was operating with the least technical facilities but in an independent country under government control. The last week of 1973 was chosen for two reasons; firstly, by then two years had gone after the independence of Bangladesh and BTV returned to its normal programming. Secondly, this particular week marked the beginning of the tenth year of telecasting in Bangladesh. By early January 1974 the government established its firm control over all the available media. The fifth week was selected with a view to investigate whether or not this impacted the overall content of television programming. Assuming that institutional changes and introduction of new technologies in 1975 have some obvious impact on the structure of television programmes the fifth week was selected from the early days of its new and modern facilities. The sixth sampled week represents the period when the BTV personnel adapted themselves to the new environment as well as the new technical facilities. This particular week was selected after observing that local programmes were increasingly attaining a better standard. The seventh week sampled for this study represents the time when BTV has already started to reach 65 per cent of the population through four relay stations; the eighth week was selected from the time period when BTV was broadcasting maximum programmes; the ninth week had been selected from a time period when BTV programmes has

become accessible to the largest number of the population; the tenth week presents a more recent picture.

The basic unit of analysis was 'minutes' of the broadcast for a given category of programme. Programmes were classified into seven categories previously used in a Unesco study (Unesco, 1985): religious, educational, informative, entertaining, cultural, children's, and women's. After category-wise classification, programmes were coded by its point of origin—domestic or imported.

■ Results

■ *The structure of programmes*

The structure of programmes of Bangladesh Television presented in Table 1 clearly indicates that the entertainment programmes dominate the overall television programme. Dominance of entertainment programmes has not been affected by technical developments or broadcasting hours. For example, in 1966, when BTV's total broadcasting time was only 1,040 minutes per week on average and it was operating with scarce resources and very little technical facilities, share of entertainment programmes was 53.7 per cent. In 1981, when BTV acquired almost all modern technical facilities and its total broadcasting time was raised to 5,603 minutes per week—more than four times that of 1966—entertainment programmes shared 53 per cent. Data also reveals that, with one exception in 1978, during the first 15 years of BTV entertainment programmes constitute more than half of the total average broadcasting time. However, recent data shows that there is a declining trend in the share of such programmes: in 1985, the share was 47.86 per cent and in 1989, the share went further down to 45.5 per cent. Nonetheless, the use of television as a medium of entertainment is still indisputable.

Within the category of entertainment programmes the largest portion of time was devoted to films: either full length feature films or serials imported from Western countries. In 1966, BTV spent 321 minutes on average per week (constituting 57.4 per cent of its total transmission) telecasting films. This amount was increased up to 2,090 minutes on average per week in 1981, meaning 70.3 per cent of total transmission.

The entertainment category was followed by informational programmes. The amount of time devoted to informational programmes varies over time and sometimes has been surpassed by educational programmes (for example, 1966, 1976 and 1981). Yet, insofar as the general trend is concerned, informational programmes' share vis-à-vis

Table 1
Structure of Programmes of the Bangladesh Television
1966-89

<i>Period</i>	<i>Total (min)</i>	<i>Programme Category (%)</i>						
		<i>Religious</i>	<i>Informative</i>	<i>Educational</i>	<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Entertainment</i>	<i>Children's</i>	<i>Women's</i>
1-7 May 1966	1,040	4.0	15.2	15.7	1.9	53.7	6.7	2.5
3-9 Nov 1970	1,604	5.3	19.2	9.4	4.5	54.4	5.3	none
26 Dec 1973-1 Jan 1974	1,346	4.9	17.8	8.1	4.4	53.8	8.9	1.8
12-18 Jan 1974	1,371	4.8	17.8	11.6	3.2	54.3	6.5	1.4
1-7 Nov 1975	1,620	2.7	18.8	14.5	3.3	54.9	4.9	none
1-7 Mar 1976	1,960	3.5	14.5	16.8	4.5	56.6	3.8	none
13-19 May 1978	2,023	4.1	19.0	15.8	4.4	48.4	6.6	1.4
16-22 Mar 1981	5,603	4.1	16.3	18.4	2.6	53.0	4.9	none
1-7 Jul 1985	2,549	5.6	22.5	10.5	9.8	47.8	3.5	none
21-27 Jun 1989	2,711	8.7	22.6	5.9	11.0	45.5	4.7	1.2

Note: Raw total may not add to 100 due to the exclusion of Public Service Announcements.

Table 2
Breakdown of Entertainment Programmes

<i>Period</i>	<i>Total (min)</i>	<i>Film (%)</i>	<i>Drama (%)</i>	<i>Song (%)</i>
1-7 May 1966	559	57.4	6.6	9.4
3-9 Nov 1970	857	79.9	5.8	14.2
26 Dec 1973-1 Jan 1974	725	82.0	6.9	11.0
12-18 Jan 1974	745	70.4	8.0	21.4
1-7 Nov 1975	955	65.4	12.5	21.9
1-7 Mar 1976	1,110	60.8	10.8	26.5
13-19 May 1978	980	48.9	17.3	27.0
16-22 Mar 1981	2,970	70.3	4.3	16.8
1-7 Jul 1985	1,220	63.9	15.1	20.9
21-27 Jun 1989	1,235	59.1	10.9	29.9

the other categories are larger. Additionally, the trend reflected in the data of recent years depict an increase. Within this category, news bulletins are the prime consumer of time. In some cases, as for example, 1974 and 1976, news bulletins consumed 100 per cent time allotted for informational programmes. Even in cases where other programmes shared the time, a very small portion of time is allotted to other informational programmes. The gradual increase over the time period does not necessarily mean that BTV has included a variety of informational programmes, rather in fact, allocated more time for news bulletins that played a prominent role in claiming more share in total time. Available data presented in Table 3 substantiate the comment.

Pre-eminence of entertainment programmes in BTV reinforces the conclusion of a Unesco study about the structure of television programmes of 14 Asia-Pacific countries that 'the medium is primarily used for entertainment purposes followed by informational programmes' (Unesco, 1985:40). One point, however, warrants attention that, in the case of BTV the position of informational programmes as the second one is not so clear. It appears that there is an oscillation between informational and educational programmes over these years.

It is interesting to note that the volume of educational programmes lack consistency, its share varied from 5.9 per cent (1989) to 18.4 per cent (1981). No relationship between total time of broadcasting and volume of educational programmes could be established. If total time was the predicator then the educational programmes should have been

Table 3
Breakdown of Informative Programmes

<i>Period</i>	<i>Total (min)</i>	<i>News (%)</i>	<i>Others (%)</i>
1-7 May 1966	159	75.4	24.5
3-9 Nov 1970	292	43.1	56.8
26 Dec 1973-1 Jan 1974	240	72.9	27.0
12-18 Jan 1974	245	100.0	0.0
1-7 Nov 1975	305	93.4	6.5
1-7 Mar 1976	285	100.0	0.0
13-19 May 1978	385	72.7	27.2
16-22 Mar 1981	915	80.8	19.1
1-7 Jul 1985	575	91.3	8.7
21-27 Jun 1989	615	86.1	13.8

increased over time. Instead, with only 1,060 minutes average per week of broadcasting time in 1966, BTV spent 15.7 per cent for educational programmes while with 2,711 minutes average per week in 1989 educational programmes' share was only 5.9 per cent. Obviously this is not an exception. In 1985 with 2,549 minutes average broadcasting per week educational programmes had only 10.5 per cent share. The maximum time devoted to educational programmes was in 1981 (18.4 per cent). As mentioned earlier, at that point of time BTV had set up an independent cell to look after the educational programmes. With the passing of time early enthusiasm might have waned which resulted in reduction of time devoted to educational programmes—even to a level lower than that of 1970.

The amount of time devoted to cultural programmes until 1981 was surprisingly low, though the potential of television in enriching the culture and heritage of a given country has always been a topic of discussion of researchers all over the world. Until 1981, cultural programmes never shared more than five per cent of total broadcast time. This category experienced a surprising and phenomenal jump in the recent years; 1985 data show a share of 9.8 per cent and 1989 data show a further jump—11.0 per cent.

Gradual increase in the share of religious programmes needs special attention and some explanations. Bangladesh, soon after its independence from Pakistan in 1971, declared itself as a secular state as opposed to an Islamic state—the character which it held as part of Pakistan.

One of the pronounced goals of the then government was to keep the state away from all sorts of religious activities. However, television, though a government-controlled media, maintained its earlier tradition of broadcasting some religious programmes, including recitation from religious books in the beginning of its daily transmissions and a weekly discussion on Islam. A little change was made. Instead of reciting from only the holy Quran it included other religious holy books, for example, the Bible, the Gita, etc. Surprisingly its tradition of broadcasting a weekly religious discussion programme was not altered. These in total raised the amount of time allotted for religious programmes. A dramatic change took place after martial law was promulgated for the first time in Bangladesh in 1975. Government started moving away from the state principle of secularism and tilted towards 'Islamic values'. Finally in 1978, a constitutional amendment excluded secularism from the national principle. And thus BTV became a medium through which government propagated Islam. In addition to the regular practice of recitation from different religious holy books more time was allotted for different types of programmes about Islam and another regular recitation session from the holy Quran at the end of the daily programmes was included. The extent of this increase can be understood from the fact that in 1981 BTV spent an average of 4.1 per cent of its 5,603 minutes of average weekly transmission on religious programmes. Though the share in percentage is less than that of 1973 (4.9 per cent), in absolute terms the amount is obviously large. Another big jump can be identified between 1985 and 1989. In 1989, the share of religious programming was as high as 8.7 per cent. It should be recalled here that the then military government made another constitutional amendment in mid-1988 that made Islam the 'state religion'. This clearly indicates that the gradual increase in religious programmes is neither a reaction to the public demand nor a choice of the BTV programme makers; but rather a reflection of the political changes and an obvious example of the BTV's vulnerability to the political authority which controls it.

The picture concerning children's and women's programmes, especially the latter depicted in Table 1 is strikingly gloomy. Children's programmes never had a share of more than 8.9 per cent; and in absolute terms the share seems to decrease in a remarkable rate. The condition of women's programmes is even worse. In some of the sample times BTV did not have a single programme. As a matter of fact, this finding led us to further investigate as to whether or not there were any flaws in the samples. But closer scrutiny of television cue-sheets of other time periods revealed that BTV usually telecast women's

programmes occasionally, usually once a month. In this regard the samples can demand a representative character. Nonetheless, the picture revealed in this study clearly demonstrates that women's programmes are an area that has deliberately been neglected by BTV.

■ *Flow of imported programmes*

Table 4 presents the volume of foreign programmes as opposed to domestically-produced television programmes in terms of percentage. Data presented in the table indicate that with an exception (1981) share of domestically-produced television programmes are gradually increasing in BTV. This finding, in a sense, runs counter to the claim of the earlier mentioned Unesco study which asserted that there is direct relationship between transmission hour and volume of imported programmes; and that the volume of imported programmes 'increases considerably with the increase in transmission time' (Unesco, 1985:40). But two observations might lead us to the same conclusion. First, that the only remarkable exception to the trend of global decrease was 1981 when BTV had the highest transmission time. At that point of time the share of imported programmes jumped from 28.5 per cent to 47.2 per cent. Both in percentage and absolute terms this increase is astounding. The second observation is that as the transmission time increases, the share may seem less in terms of percentage but insofar as the total time is concerned, viewers are watching more imported programmes than before. Although it is difficult to answer whether the increase of imported programmes was because BTV found it 'cheaper to fill in the transmission time with the imported programmes rather than producing their own programmes at a much higher cost' (Unesco, 1985:40) or some other reason, the author has no reason to differ with that assumption.

Within the imported programmes, entertainment programmes, predominantly films, share the largest portion. In 1966, imported films consumed an average 321 minutes per week of total transmission. In 1970, the average was 545 minutes per week and in 1973, the average was 595 minutes per week. Corresponding figures for the years 1974, 1975 and 1976 were 525, 625 and 675 minutes. In 1978, the volume decreased to 480 minutes per week. But in 1981 it reached 1,870 minutes. In 1989, the amount of 730 minutes. Other than films BTV imports some sports programmes and a few documentaries.

■ **Conclusions**

The present study concludes that television in Bangladesh is used

Table 4
Comparison of Programmes by Origin

<i>Period</i>	<i>Domestic (%)</i>	<i>Imported (%)</i>
1-7 May 1966	58.6	41.3
3-9 Nov 1970	56.4	43.5
26 Dec 1973-1 Jan 1974	60.5	39.4
12-18 Jan 1974	63.7	36.3
1-7 Nov 1975	63.6	36.3
1-7 Mar 1976	66.1	33.8
13-19 May 1978	71.4	28.5
16-22 Mar 1981	52.7	47.2
1-7 Jul 1985	71.3	28.6
21-27 Jun 1989	70.9	29.0

predominantly as a medium of entertainment since its inception in 1964 and is still treated as such. Although during the last 23 years BTV is increasingly reaching a larger audience and experienced a phenomenal development in technical facilities, its structure of programmes remains almost the same. This clearly indicates that only infrastructural development has not entailed any change in the structure and content of programmes of a given television organization.

This study also reveals that Bangladesh Television is still dependent upon imported programmes to a large extent to feed its transmission hours. Once again, the technical facilities have had a little effect on BTV in this regard.

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