INSPIRING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Lessons from the media

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Part 1 Inspiring political participation

Political participation is the lifeblood of democracy. In too many countries the poor, the young, women and those who live in remote areas are excluded from decision-making. When people discuss issues, express their opinions and take action with their neighbours, those in power are more likely to take notice and respond to their needs.

Since 2011, with funding from the UK Department of International Development, BBC Media Action has supported more than 30 governance and rights-focused TV and radio programmes, reaching over 190 million people in 12 countries. These debates, magazine programmes and dramas – local productions, co-productions and BBC broadcasts – varied significantly in tone and shape, and operated in very different political and media climates. But all these programmes sought to increase participation and accountability; reaching people that other media tend to ignore, getting them talking about politics and supporting them to influence decisions on the issues that affect their lives.

To assess BBC Media Action’s impact, researchers talked to 23,000 people across seven of the countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania) reached by its programmes.
How did we measure political participation?

- Participating in an organised effort to solve a neighbourhood or community problem
- Attending a meeting of the local town council
- Contacting a local official
- Contacting a national official
- Contacting a local chief or traditional leader about an issue
- Taking part in a protest, march or demonstration
- Intending to vote in the next general election
- Intending to vote in the next local election

Our results

The findings are clear and consistent across all seven countries: BBC Media Action’s audiences know more, discuss more and participate more in politics than people who don’t listen to and/or watch its programmes.

This is even when taking other influencing factors – such as age, income and interest in politics – into account. This paper seeks to explore how that impact was achieved.
Part 2 What have we learned?

Four factors were important for BBC Media Action’s programmes to connect with people, and inspire them to discuss and pursue change on the issues that mattered to them.

i) Enabling discussions, not just providing information

Access to information is important. But it is not enough. Information only gains power through who is talking about it and how it is used. BBC Media Action supports programmes that generate public discussion based on a balanced presentation of the facts. BBC Media Action research shows that getting people discussing politics is strongly linked to higher levels of political participation.

In some countries, people demand confrontational debates to pressurise leaders to make promises and deliver on them. In others, people prefer more constructive conversations built around collective problem-solving. Sometimes, using drama to challenge social norms around who is expected to participate in politics can be the most effective way to connect with less politically engaged groups such as rural women. BBC Media Action’s projects help to develop discussions that are effective in local contexts – based on an understanding of what engages people, what opens up space and what puts real pressure on those in power.

“Everyone can put forth their concern regardless of class, caste and ethnicity.”

Female (18–25 years), Banke, Nepal

Our programme in Nepal, Sajha Sawal (Common Questions), reaches 6.6 million people and creates a platform for discussion between people from all parts of society and their leaders.
One conclusion of The power of talk policy briefing (exploring media and accountability in Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Angola) was that creating opportunities for collective problem-solving between people and leaders – especially at local level – was more likely to engage audiences than a confrontational approach. It also concluded that this collaborative approach is more likely to lead to change on the ground in these countries.

At the start of BBC Media Action’s project in Kenya, focus groups were shown a pilot discussion programme. They reacted strongly to the intimate studio arrangement in which members of the audience sat alongside panellists. They wanted to be seated above the panellists in order to confront them about their failings. This helped shape the debate show Sema Kenya (Kenya Speaks).
ii) Role modelling participation for everyone

The 104 million people BBC Media Action programming reached in 2015 are broadly representative of their country’s populations. While many broadcasters focus on wealthier urban populations and cover the issues that matter to them, BBC Media Action tries to reach and represent the whole of society – engaging younger, poorer, female and rural populations. Our analysis shows that people exposed to BBC Media Action governance programmes are more likely to participate in politics – this is particularly notable among younger people, less educated people and those less interested in politics.4

Figure 1: People exposed to BBC Media Action governance programmes are more likely to participate in politics, with larger increases seen in groups that traditionally participate less

Note: These results are drawn from regression analysis on data from nationally representative perception surveys from seven countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania).

The programmes that BBC Media Action supports are not just about getting big audiences to watch people from every part of society speaking directly with people in power. They address big governance issues in ways that people can relate to their lives, challenge norms around who can question whom, press leaders to respond and encourage inclusive discussions around solutions.

**iii) Independent, balanced spaces for constructive discussions**

In many countries where BBC Media Action works, the media is increasingly fractured and co-opted by political interest groups. In such contexts, public discussion is rarely balanced and is unlikely to represent diverse interests or encourage dialogue across entrenched divides in society.

BBC Media Action provides a distinct alternative. Audience members consistently identified constructive dialogue, incorporation of diverse views and opinions and avoidance of the “blame game” as things that set its programmes apart. They also regarded these programmes as a “safe” forum to question those in power without fear of recrimination.

Drama can be an effective vehicle to discuss sensitive and controversial issues, such as intercommunal violence, helping people to understand abstract concepts through the prism of everyday experience.
“The TV and the officials and the citizens have to get used to this. This type of programme is the direction we are heading in. There is a difference between criticising and holding to account... between criticising for [the] sake of criticism and criticising for the sake of change.”

Mahmoud Khaliefah, Deputy Minister of Information, Palestinian Territories, discussing The Palestinian Debates, programmes supported by BBC Media Action
Developing constructive space is challenging. Programme makers must navigate interests of different political, economic, social or ethnic groups. In places where leaders are not used to direct questioning from citizens, getting people in power to participate in political discussion programmes can also be difficult. However, by applying BBC editorial values, appointing strong, independent presenters and resisting political interference, BBC Media Action developed spaces audiences could trust to be non-partisan. \(^5\) Once political leaders saw that they would get a fair opportunity to put across their point of view, they became more eager to participate in programmes.

**iv) Understanding and adaptation**

Since 2011 media and communication landscapes have transformed in the low- and middle-income states where BBC Media Action works. Access to digital media has exploded, censorship, information control...
and propaganda have increased and political, factional and extremist forces have increasingly sought to co-opt the media.

Effective governance programming relies on the ability to understand and respond to changing context. Strong local teams and effective partnerships were vital for BBC Media Action to understand how politics, communication and media were changing. BBC Media Action also invested in research, building an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the media habits of different populations, how to reach them and help them overcome barriers to political participation.

While many of the programmes that BBC Media Action supported can be described as debates, each is unique to its context. The organisation seeks to build the most effective discussion for each country at a specific time – involving a creative cycle of analysing, planning, risk-taking, failing, learning and refining.
**Good practice in adaptive programming with media**

**Build audience-responsive programmes** – audience participation in programmes (in person, or through mobiles and online), or discussion groups before and after broadcast, can ensure programmes continuously adapt to the context. Members of live audiences at programme recordings also provide a regular barometer of audience opinion on what issues are important to them and where the programme is most effective.

**CASE STUDY 1:** BBC Media Action’s programmes have to adapt quickly to stay relevant. In Myanmar, for example, access to mobiles has tripled since 2013. More than half the population now have access to the internet. Our programmes are adapting, engaging audience members online. Facebook “likes” of the *Lin Lat Kyair Sin* (Bright Young Stars) page, one of the programmes supported by BBC Media Action in Myanmar, have grown by more than 250,000 in 2016.

**Adapt to changing contexts** – the timing of an election, onset of a natural disaster or political crisis all change audience priorities and what is possible in influencing political participation and accountability. This requires an ongoing analysis of the governance environment, strategic planning of programming, and a willingness to adapt formats and target audiences accordingly.
CASE STUDY 2: 2015 was a year of unprecedented political engagement in Nigeria, culminating in the country’s first peaceful transition of power to an opposition party. More than 36.5 million Nigerians regularly tuned in to BBC Media Action radio programmes in the lead-up to these momentous elections. Interest in politics often drops after an election. However, by refocusing on the government’s responsibility to deliver on its promises and by using an imaginative mix of drama, magazine and debate programming to engage different audiences, BBC Media Action governance programming was still able to attract 36.2 million regular listeners a year after the elections.

Maintain a focus on long-term change – BBC Media Action’s projects seek to deliver a long-term increase in the amount of trusted, inclusive and independent content in media and communication environments. This requires flexibility in who to work with, and how and when to ensure that governance programmes have maximum impact on the behaviour of media organisations.
Endnotes

1 The Global Grant is a multi-country grant to BBC Media Action funded by the UK Department for International Development from 2011 to 2017.


4 Scavo and Snow, Media and political participation

5 BBC editorial values are: trust, truth and accuracy, impartiality, editorial integrity and independence, protect the vulnerable from harm and avoid unjustifiable offence, serving the public interest, fairness, respecting privacy, safeguarding children, transparency and accountability. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/bbc-editorial-values/editorial-values [Accessed 18 November 2016].

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