

TELEVISION TALK SHOWS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

The concept of public sphere, which was first introduced by Habermas, refers to the notion of a public domain or arena where discourses on various issues take place in society. Central to Habermas' idea of public sphere is the principle of equal opportunity for everyone to participate in a debate, and the ability of individuals to communicate, negotiate and articulate ideas amongst themselves. Television talk show in this respect could be seen as a mechanism to promote the idea of public sphere. In Malaysia, television talk show is fast becoming a popular television genre and has an important place in television scheduling. In this regard, the latest development in local television scenario necessitates an in-depth investigation into the extent to which the concept of public sphere vis-a-vis talk show can be regarded as domain where various issues about Malaysia are discussed.

Keywords: *Public Sphere; Talk Shows; Malaysia; television; scheduling*

BUAL BICARA DI TELEVISYEN DAN SFERA AWAM

Abstrak

Konsep sfera awam, diperkenalkan oleh Habermas, merujuk kepada konsep domain awam atau arena di mana wacana mengenai pelbagai isu dalam masyarakat diperkatakan. Teras kepada idea sfera awam ialah prinsip peluang yang sama bagi semua orang

untuk mengambil bahagian dalam perbincangan sesuatu isu, dan keupayaan individu untuk berkomunikasi, berunding dan menyuarakan idea-idea di kalangan mereka sendiri. Rancangan bualbicara televisyen dalam hal ini boleh dilihat sebagai satu mekanisme untuk menggalakkan idea sfera awam. Di Malaysia, rancangan bual bicara menjadi semakin popular dan mendapat tempat yang penting dalam penjadualan televisyen. Dalam hal ini, perkembangan terbaru senario televisyen tempatan memerlukan kajian mendalam mengenai sfera awam dalam ertikata lain rancangan bual bicara boleh dianggap sebagai domain di mana pelbagai isu tentang Malaysia dibincangkan.

Kata kunci: *sfera awam; bual bicara; Malaysia; televisyen; penjadualan*

Introduction

In Malaysia, television talk show is fast becoming a popular television genre and has an important place in television scheduling. Television talk shows achieved widespread following the introduction of the morning talk shows in 1980s. In the 1990s television talk shows in Malaysia further gained popularity with many programmes highlighting the entertainment industry and local gossips were produced. In recent years, more and more talk show programmes are made available on Malaysian television providing information and educating the general public about a variety of issues concerning politics, economy, cultural and social aspects. Majority of these programmes are locally produced and made available on almost all free-to-air television stations.

In this regard, the latest development in the local television scenario necessitates an in-depth investigation into the extent of which, following the concept of public sphere, talk shows can be regarded as a domain where issues concerning local aspects are discussed. Television talk show could be seen as one of the mechanisms to promote the idea of public sphere in the modern setting. In this particular context, television talk show can be regarded as a domain whereby various meanings are articulated and negotiated within society. The aim of this article is firstly, to identify the general pattern of talk shows programming currently available on Malaysian television and secondly, the article attempts to understand what constitutes television talk shows as well as assessing the role of the programmes within the Malaysian context.

The Public Sphere

The concept of ‘public sphere’, a term developed by Habermas in 1962, refers to the notion of a public domain or arena where debates on various issues take

place. Central to Habermas' idea of public sphere is the principle of equal opportunity for everyone to participate in a debate, and the ability of individuals to communicate, negotiate and articulate ideas amongst themselves. He pointed out:

“The Public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent”

(Habermas:1962, translated by Burger, 1989, p.27).

In other words, Habermas' notion of public sphere centres on the idea of participatory democracy by which democratic decisions that inform political action in society are reached. The collapse of feudalism and the rise of middle class (the bourgeoisie) society/culture in the 18th century - Habermas argued - contributed a great deal in promoting his idea of participatory democracy through what is known as the bourgeois public sphere presented as a forum for critical-rational debate. This kind of public sphere was seen as an important agent in achieving the ideal condition for civil society. During the 18th century, the growth of coffee shops, salons and other public spaces, and the press created forum for self expressions as well as platform for expressing opinions and agendas for public discussions which are free from state and market intervention (Habermas, 1989). In modern society today, arguably, television can be seen as a medium – a spatial forum - that stimulates public discussion on various issues essential for the democratic process.

Over the years, there had been an extensive evaluation of Habermas' notion of public sphere and the role of the media in perpetuating democratic space for common citizens (Curran, 1991), (Dahlgren, 1995), (Mc Guigan, 1996), (Livingstone and Lunt, 2004) and (Sparks, 2004). Many have pointed out that the entire concept is too idealistic and simplistic. Habermas regards public sphere as a self-contained entity that is able to operate in seclusion detached from the wider social context (Curran, 1991 and Dahlgren, 1995). The public sphere as a market place of ideas, according to Dahlgren (1995, p. 12), cannot be seen as a space functioning in isolation from all other social, political and economic domains. He pointed out:

“To understand the public sphere under any specific historical circumstances requires taking into account larger societal figuration which both compromise its space and constitute the preconditions for its functioning. A society where democratic tendencies are weak and the structure features of society are highly in egalitarian is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere” (1995, p. 12).

Similarly, Curran (1991, p. 29) pointed out that Habermas’ notion Public Sphere fails to adequately take into account the way power is exercised through capitalist and patriarchal structures within society. It ignores the ways in which interests have become organized and collectivized. Curran (ibid, p. 36) asserts that media is an agency of class control and is subject to its ideological hegemony. He further emphasized that media should be viewed as state ideological apparatus through which the ruling order is ultimately sustained.

Mass media in general - and television in this particular context as pointed out earlier - does not operate in a vacuum. This datum contradicts Habermas’ notion of public sphere. Media institutions, according to Dahlgren (1995, p. 12) are organized within frameworks of set rules and regulations (coercion) of how they should operate. Ownership and control indeed play a crucial factor that define the working parameters for media institutions as well as media output.

In terms of media output, questions have been raised with regard to the representation of television content. The dimension of representation in television points to the basic questions such as what should be selected for portrayal, how it should it be presented and what kind of modes of discourses are at work (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 12). In this context, television talk shows should be seen as a ‘site of struggle’ where various meanings are constantly articulated and negotiated amongst citizens.

Interestingly, in his notion of public sphere Habermas had also argued that media, in this context, television, could be seen as providing space for every section in society, which includes marginalized individuals/group, to discuss their issues. This aspect, however, has failed to take into consideration the actual complexity of the structure (Dahlgren, 1995, Livingstone and Lunt, 2004, and Sparks, 2004) of modern society where equal opportunity could take place. Sparks (2004) further reinstated that the existing media system should be understood as only performing ‘selected representation’ of society, thus, questions need to be asked as “...to what extent are the [media] open to all citizens? ... to what extent is debate free and uncensored? ...to what extent are citizens participants in, rather than spectators at, the debate?” (ibid, 2004, p. 140). It can be concluded here that the existence of public sphere must be seen in a wider social context.

Two important points discussed earlier in this article arguably play a major role in determining the function of television as a public domain. Political economy

is central to the discussion whereby investigation on ownership and control of the media is crucial to understand the framework set for media institution - which in turn established a standard for the media output and representations.

It has also been highlighted here that equal access to the media sphere is important in the process of understanding television talk shows as a platform for citizens to articulate their views. Unbalanced representation of the larger section in society in a given democratic space raised serious questions as to who gets included and who gets excluded in practicing their right for freedom of expression.

Television Industry and Television Talk Shows in Malaysia

Television in Malaysia started in 1963 with the introduction of TV 1. Later in 1969, TV 2 was established. Both channels are owned and run by the government. In 1984, the first commercial television stations, *TV3* the first 'privately' owned free-to-air television station was launched, essentially ended more than two decades of the state monopoly of the broadcast institution in Malaysia. During the 1990s more television stations were established. The first pay TV, a satellite transmission based known as *ASTRO* was launched in 1996 and following that in 1997, *ntv7* yet another free-to-air station was set up. The year 2000, continues to see the escalated growth of television industry in Malaysia, with the establishment of *8TV* and *TV9* in 2003 and 2004 respectively. The advances in technology had also contributed to the increasing number of television stations in this country. Using Internet Protocol, IP, *Mitv* was launched in 2005 and shortly after that *Fine TV* was introduced in December 2008 based on internet broadband technology. Both channels are subscription based.

As far as the ownership and control of the broadcast institution is concerned, it was observed (Meor Zailan, 1992), (Gomez, 1994), (Lay Kim, 1998), (Zaharom, 2000) and (Juliana, 2010) that all television stations are either directly or indirectly owned and controlled by the state and generally, content of the programmes are tailored towards promoting the state ideology and policies.

Television talk shows in Malaysia began to gain popularity after the introduction of the morning breakfast show, namely, *Malaysia Hari Ini (MHI)* in 1986 on *TV3* and *Selamat Pagi 1Malaysia* on *TV1* which have since been aired on a daily basis on weekdays. Both programmes in general are similar to many morning talk shows in the West, in particular *Good Morning America*, facilitated by television personalities (*Berita Harian*, 18 June 2008). Both programmes are still being aired today.

In terms of the content of the programme, both morning breakfast shows discuss a wide range of topics and issues which are deemed to be of interest to the local audience, for example, issues relating to politics, economy, social and entertainment. *Selamat Pagi 1Malaysia* however has the tendency to incorporate contents which support and promote state policies and ideology.

Such portrayal is due to the fact that *Selamat Pagi 1Malaysia* is being broadcast on a government channel; it is therefore natural for the programme to highlight state agendas.

A specific talk show programme devoted to the female audience, *Wanita Hari Ini* (Women Today), was introduced in 2002. The programme is aired on *TV3* on a daily basis. The programme focuses on women's issues and is aimed at educating and empowering women in Malaysia. It is observed, however, that in general this programme deals with conservative issues and values about women which conform to the patriarchal ideology (Azwan and Juliana, 2005).

The mushrooming of talk show programmes started in the late 1990s when many talk show programmes began to be aired on Malaysian television. *Dateline*, for instance, was aired on (*ntv7*) in 1998. This programme dealt with issues concerning local politics, and the panels were often made up of politicians who were invited to express their views on the chosen topic. It has been noted that the content of television in Malaysia has always been skewed towards the ideology of the ruling elite (Zaharom, 1996, Wang Lay Kim, 1998), Zaharom and Mustafa Kamal Anuar, 2000). Unlike many other talk show programmes in Malaysia, *Dateline* was rather controversial in terms of its representation. In one of its programmes, a panel made up of individuals from both the government and the opposition was invited to the studio. This attempt provided an opening for members of the opposition party to express their political views on Malaysian television. The programme concluded in a heated discussion in which negative comments were made about the government. Soon after, the programme was terminated as it was deemed 'unsuitable' for the general public (<http://online.wsj.com/article>).

It has been observed that the majority of the programmes aired earlier were intended to provide information and to educate the general public about a variety of issues. In terms of topics covered, the earlier mentioned programmes introduced a wide range of topics from local politics, economy and entertainment. Television talk shows in Malaysia further gained its popularity with the introduction of a programme called *Chit-Chat Azwan* (1995) that focused on the entertainment industry and local gossips. The mode of talk in the programme was mere sensationalization (often involving personal issues, typically of local celebrities) and it did not have the clear structure of a typical television interview. This characteristic, according to Dahlgren (1995, 65) gives rise to 'synthetic personalities', where such talk shows create a growing ambivalence as to the function of entertainment and information. The light and easy-going approach with studio spectators for the programme managed to draw local audience to tune in to the programme, thus increasing its popularity.

Beginning the year 2000, more talk show programmes of this kind were aired on Malaysian television on a weekly basis on commercial channels which include the subscription based TV. Among the programmes are *Anita* (2003), *Pillow Talk* (2005), *Macam-macam Aznil* (2005), *Fenomena Seni* (2006), *AC*

Di Sini (2006) *Sensasi* (2007), *Jangan Tidur Lagi* (2008), *Ally* (2009) and *Alahai Fafau* (2010). The economic factor evidently plays an important role in stimulating the growth of the television talk show programmes (Wilson, 1996) in Malaysia. A fixed studio setting and a limited number of 'actors' for the talk shows make such programmes cheap to produce. The use of celebrities and popular artists as studio guests arguably has become a major attraction for local audience to tune in to the programme, thus, enabling the programmes to achieve high television ratings.

Apart from the growing number of sensational television chat shows, religious talk shows have also started to occupy a space in television scheduling in Malaysia. Some of the religious talk show programmes on free-to-air television stations are *Forum Perdana Ehwah Islam* (TV1), *Al-Kuliyah* (TV3) and *Halaqah* (TV9). It appears that the increase in the number of religious talk shows on Malaysian television is partly due to the concept of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) introduced in 2003 by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Abdullah Hj. Ahmad Badawi. In essence, *Islam Hadhari* is a concept based on the principles of Islam as derived from the Qur'an. During Abdullah's term as a Prime Minister (November 2002-March 2009), the idea of *Islam Hadhari* was widely promoted by the Malaysian media, which essentially encourage the production of many religious talk show programmes which focus on Islamic tenets.

Based on the analysis of week of television scheduling from 24 January -30 January 2011, there were twenty-nine talk shows programme being aired in Malaysia, focusing on a variety of issues such as politics, economics, and entertainment. Overall, slots allocated for talk shows on free-to-air TV in Malaysia represents about 11% of the total airtime across all free-to-air channels in a week. Out of the 29 talk shows studied, only three (10%) were imported programmes while the other 26 representing about 90% of the talk shows were locally produced. The general pattern of talk show programmes can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1:
Language Breakdown of Talk Shows on Free-to-Air Television in Malaysia from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011

Language \ Channel	<i>TV1</i>	<i>TV2</i>	<i>TV3</i>	<i>ntv7</i>	<i>8TV</i>	<i>TV9</i>	Total	Percentage
Malay	7	-	6	-	-	7	20	70%
English	-	-	-	6	-	-	6	21%
Mandarin	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3%
Tamil	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3%
Bilingual (Malay and English)	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3%
Total	7	3	6	6	-	7	29	100%

The table indicates the language breakdown of talk shows on free-to-air TV in Malaysia from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011. All talk shows programmes on *TV1*, *TV3* and *TV9* were conducted in Malay resulting in Malay language representing the highest percentage, 70% across all talk shown on all the channels. The only channel that aired fully English programmes was *ntv7*. Out of the six programmes in English aired by the station, 3 were foreign programmes namely *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Martha Stewart Show* and *The Rachael Ray Show*. These were the only foreign talk show programmes on Malaysian free-to-air TV as the rest were all locally produced. *TV2* had the most interesting choice of languages which catered to more diversified group of audiences as there was one programme conducted bilingually (*Hello on Two*), one in Mandarin (*What Say You*) and one in Tamil (*Vasantham*).

The talk shows on free-to-air TV in Malaysia from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011 can be broken down into nine sub-genres¹. Current Affairs is the most popular sub-genre (as shown in Table 2) and out of the eight Current Affairs talk shows, one was conducted in English, one in Mandarin, one in Tamil, one bilingually while the rest of the talk shows were in Malay.

Whilst, Table 2 shows that there were twenty-nine talk shows programmes being aired on free-to-air channels from 24 January-30 January 2011. *TV1* and *TV9* aired seven talk shows each, *TV3* and *ntv7* aired six talk shows each, while *TV2* aired only three talk shows. From the table it is clear that *TV1* had five categories for their talk shows which include Current Affairs, Religion, Business, Politics and Women. It appears that Current Affairs and Politics shared the same number of slots on *TV1*. On the other hand, *TV2* only had three talk shows aired and all three shows are current affairs related. *TV2* has the least number of talk shows.

Table 2:
Sub-Genre Breakdown of Talk Show Programmes on Free-to-Air
Television in Malaysia from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011

Genre \ Channel	<i>TV1</i>	<i>TV2</i>	<i>TV3</i>	<i>ntv7</i>	<i>8TV</i>	<i>TV9</i>
Religion	14.29% (1)*	-	16.67% (1)	-	-	57.14% (4)
Sports	-	-	16.67% (1)	-	-	-
Entertainment	-	-	16.67% (1)	-	-	28.57% (2)
Variety	-	-	-	33.33% (2)	-	-
Business	14.29% (1)	-	-	-	-	-
Politics	28.57% (2)	-	16.67% (1)	-	-	-
Youth	-	-	-	16.67% (1)	-	-
Current Affairs	28.57% (2)	100% (3)	16.67% (1)	16.67% (1)	-	14.29% (1)
Women	14.29% (1)	-	16.67% (1)	33.33% (2)	-	-
Total	100% (7)	100% (3)	100% (6)	100% (6)	-	100% (7)

* indicates the number of programmes

The number of talk shows on *TV3* and *ntv7* are equal. However, *TV3* shows a more evenly scattered pattern of talk shows across the categories with one show representing each of the six out of nine categories listed above. The categories are Religion, Sports, Entertainment, Politics, Current Affairs and Women. On the contrary, although *ntv7* had the same number of talk show programs as *TV3*, its pattern is not as evenly scattered. 33.33% of talk shows aired on *ntv7* were of the Variety category, 33.33% of the talk shows were categorized as Women shows and 16.67% representing Youth and Current Affairs related shows each.

8TV had not been recorded as airing any talk show programmes at all from 24 January – 30 January 2011. From a total of twenty-nine talk shows analyzed within this period, seven were aired on TV9 encompassing three categories namely Religion, Entertainment and Current Affairs. Although the number of talk shows aired on TV1 and TV9 were the same, the percentage representations across categories were not. Religion represented 57.14% of talk shows on TV9 followed by Entertainment 28.57% and Current Affairs 14.29%. While on TV1, Current Affairs and Politics were equally represented at 28.57%, followed by Business, Women and Religion at 14.29% each.

When broken down to specific sub-genres of talk show programmes, it was evident that the top three talk show programmes on Malaysian TV consisted of Current Affairs with 27.59% (8 shows), followed by Religion with 20.69% (6 shows) and Women with 13.8% (4 shows).

In total, there were nine Current Affairs talk shows shown on Malaysian TV from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011. On TV1, talk shows which fall into this category are *Selamat Pagi 1Malaysia*, and *Dialog. Selamat Pagi 1Malaysia* is a talk show which invites panels or guests from different backgrounds to the studio to discuss current issues which are perceived to be relevant to Malaysians at large. *Dialog* is a programme where ministers or government officers are invited to the studio to talk about various issues concerning the public such as education, employment and consumerism.

Other Current Affairs talk shows aired from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011 were *Hello on Two*, *What Say You* and *Vasantham (TV2)*, *Malaysia Hari Ini (TV3)*, *The Breakfast Show (ntv7)* and *Nasi Lemak Kopi O (TV9)*. Although TV2 has the least number of talk shows aired within this period, but due to all three programmes falling under the same category (albeit in different languages), TV2 was found to represent the highest percentage of talk shows across all the channels.

The next most popular sub-genre is Religion. It is apparent that Religion talk shows are popular on TV9 representing 57.14% of the total number of talk shows aired on TV9 from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011. This is partly to serve their marketing strategy, as TV9 is devoted to Islamic approach and targeted to Muslim audience. Two Religion shows were given more slots than the others as these shows were sometimes aired twice or thrice within the same day. *Tanyalah Ustaz* and *Tanyalah Ustazah* on TV9 were allocated slots in the mornings and late at night. On the other hand TV1 and TV3 had only one Religion talk show each namely *Forum Perdana Ehwat Islam* and *Al-Kuliyah*.

Out of the four Women talk shows found across the channels, two were aired on ntv7 while one on TV1 and one on TV3. The number of Women talk shows and Variety talk shows on ntv7 were found to be equal and represented the highest percentage of talk show programmes on ntv7 at 33.33% each. Although TV3 only had one Women talk show (*Wanita Hari Ini*) aired within the period, but the show was allocated 2 slots everyday from Monday to Friday at noon

and 4.30am. No other talk shows on *TV3* were given the same number of slots as *Wanita Hari Ini*.

As far as talk shows sub-genre diversity is concerned, *TV3* talk shows were the most widely spread across the sub-genres covering six categories namely Religion, Sports, Entertainment, Politics, Current Affairs and Women. While the most concentrated channel is *TV2* with all three programmes falling under the Current Affairs category. Sports, Business and Youth were the least popular category across all the sub-genres of talk shows analyzed on free-to-air Malaysian TV from 24 January 2011 – 30 January 2011.

Exploring the Talk

For the purpose of this study, three talk show programmes under different sub-genres were chosen for the analysis to set an understanding of the nature of television talk shows in Malaysia and the kind of the role it plays in Malaysian context. The selection is based on different representations in terms of ownership of television station, airtime and different target audience for the programmes. The selection is in no way a representative of all talk show programmes in Malaysia, but this study nonetheless provide an idea of what constitutes television talk shows in Malaysia.

The programmes are selected for the following reasons; *Blog* is selected as it is one of the political talk shows being aired on government channel (*TV1*), *Wanita Hari Ini* is selected because it is one of the programmes on local television created specifically for female viewers and it is aired on a commercial channel (*TV3*), *Halaqah* on the other hand, represents a sub-genre of the religious talk show, and is aired on *TV9*

BLOG (Political Talk show)

BLOG is a thirty-minutes programme which focuses on political issues and is broadcast in the national language on *TV1* (government channel). The programme uses a typical studio setting with a studio host and an invited guest. On 27 April 2008, the programme invited to the studio one of the most famous and controversial bloggers in Malaysia, Raja Petra Kamarudin (a strong supporter of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) (People's Democratic Party), the opposition party, to discuss the topic of blogs as a new medium to disseminate information and encourage freedom of expression, as well as to comment on the government's reaction towards the new medium.

In essence, the programme intended to show to the general public that the government of Malaysia is open to criticism and acknowledges views from the opposition party. The talk began with a short clip featuring public opinion on Raja Petra, which showed generally positive comments about Raja Petra. The later shot showed the studio host welcoming Raja Petra to the studio and Raja Petra being asked about his feelings on being invited to the studio for the

first time as an icebreaking question. Initially, Raja Petra declined to participate in the programme as he was worried that this was one of the tactics of the government to sensationalize his appearance but later changed his mind so that the public does not have a bad impression of him.

The programme began to show some sparks and conflict when more serious and critical issues were raised. Questions such as freedom of expression and democratic space in blogging were discussed. The way the questions were posed seemed to be leaning towards the government, whereby the host put forth the idea that there had been openness and a tolerating attitude on the part of the government concerning issues of democratic space and freedom of expression in blogging. Raja Petra however, responded to the statement by disagreeing that there was openness on the part of the Malaysian government with regard to freedom of expression in the media and asserted that the current open attitude is rather superficial, therefore questionable.

It was also observed that each time Raja Petra made a strong and critical commentary about the government, it was quickly intercepted by the host, who proceeded to give positive remarks about the government. It was also obvious that the host in the programme tended to dominate the whole session. Presumably, this was done to ensure that the discussion did not detract from mainstream perspectives, so as to promote a good image of the ruling government. It is clear from the analysis above that *Blog* in essence is slanted the government and towards the ideology of the state.

WANITA HARI INI (Women's Talk Show).

Wanita Hari Ini (WHI) is a programme introduced in 2002 dedicated to women. It is broadcasted daily from Monday to Friday on *TV3* for sixty minutes in the afternoon. The studio setting is arranged to look like a living room with two female anchor persons hosting the programme. In general, the talk show highlights a number of issues concerning women.

In the programme aired on 6 Nov 2008, WHI, the topic discussed was *Tilam dan Bantal: Gelora Rumahtangga*, which dealt with the recent scandal involving the marriage of a famous local artist. The programme invited Abby Abadi (an actress) and Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Ahmad (a motivation expert) to the studio to share their views and discuss the topic on family institution. The programme began with a welcome gesture to both guests. Shortly afterwards, questions on personal matters were quickly posed to Abby to find out her feelings towards the scandal involving her husband that was exposed by the local media. Questions were asked on how she felt about the scandal and her ways of resolving the issue. Abby was initially portrayed as a strong woman who is able to go through the divorce process when she calmly responded to the first few questions about her relationship with her husband.

The talk, however, started to stir some emotions when Abby began to talk about her pregnancy and her relationship to her husband and when more questions

were asked about her personal life. This part was prolonged in the programme. Questions were later posed to Prof. Dr Ibrahim Ahmad to obtain his views on the relationship between men and women and the role each should play to maintain their marriage. Interestingly, Wanita Hari Ini sought the opinions of a male expert on relationships and family matters to advise Abby and audience of the programmes at large on how to manage their married life and families. The choice of having a male expert talking on these issues indirectly suggest that male opinion matters and is important to the public although the producer of the programme could also resort to female experts in giving the views in this aspect.

It can be concluded here that *WHI* tends to be feminine in its presentation in both form and substance. In terms of its form, the setting used is a nicely decorated living room which seems to suggest that women's issues are of a domestic nature and should only be confined to the domestic sphere. As far as the content is concerned, the talk show programme about women tends to focus on the emotional aspect and personal matters rather than asking the guests more critical and challenging questions. It can be said that subjects about women in the media tend to be sensationalized in order to sell stories to attract viewership.

HALAQAH (Religious Talk Show)

Halaqah is a talk show programme concerning religious matters specifically those relating to Islam. The programme began airing in 2007, and is currently shown on TV 9 on a weekly basis for an hour every Tuesday night. The programme uses a typical studio setting with an Islamic feel and is hosted by an anchor person with an invited studio panel. *Halaqah* is a talk show programme which aims at informing and educating the general public, specifically Muslims about Islamic teachings and beliefs and at promoting good moral values.

The programme which was aired on 1 June 2008 discussed the topic of *Qiyamat*. Two panels were invited to the studio. The programme format included discussions and intervals consisting interpretations of verses from the Qur'an. The discussion centred mostly on clarification of verses in the Qur'an and moral values that one could obtain. The two panels were Dr. Daniel Zainal Abidin and Dr. Hj Jamnul Azhar Mulkan. Both are medical practitioners and scholars disseminating Islamic teachings (*Pendakwah*). It was observed that the programme did not focus on Islam per se but also tried to make the connection between Islam and scientific evidence. Explanation was given through the perspectives provided by the two professional panels. This programme tries to portray Islam as a progressive religion, which is in line with Abdullah's (former Prime Minister) policy in promoting *Islam Hadhari*.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, Current Affairs appears to be the most aired television talk shows in Malaysia. Although these kind of programmes, discussed variety of topics such as politics, economic, social and cultural aspects, it was obvious that the nature of the overall content and discussions were very much aligned to the state ideology. In a more specific context, following on the content analysis done on the three talk shows it can be concluded that in general all selected programmes for the analysis exhibit 'safe' opinion formation about issues covered and to a certain extent maintain the current social order that exist in Malaysia.

In all the talk shows programmes, it was apparent that the majority of the hosts and guests invited for the talk shows were men. It seemed that in general, men are given more authority to conduct/provide more serious and constructive views in the programmes in topics relating to politics, current affairs and general knowledge. Women, meanwhile, are only given the task to manage small and petty topics concerning domestic and personal issues. It was also apparent that in one of the talk show programmes, women's discussions were centred around emotional aspects whereas in other talk shows, including religious ones focused more on men and their intellectual capacity and their ability to engage in serious discussions. If anything at all, this a clear manifestation of patriarchal ideology at work on television in Malaysia, particularly in talk show programmes, where women and issues about women are not seriously discussed and are deemed unimportant, thus suggesting to some extent the position of local women in Malaysia.

The other obvious finding is that television is used essentially to promote the ideology of the ruling elite. This was cleverly done through *Blog*. In the programme for instance, the guest from the opposition party was invited to express his views. It was, however, observed that the discussions were heavily controlled and regulated by the anchor person and were skewed towards the ideology of the state. Additionally, the liberal approach taken by the government to provide breathing space on the media for the opposition party should not be translated as a liberal attitude towards them. What is evident is that the effort is consciously done to mainly project the good image of the Malaysian government.

What is also apparent is that in all programmes analyzed, the talk shows focus only on the discussion between the anchor person and studio guest. There was no involvement from the public in the verbal exchange. Only one (*Halaqah*) out of three programmes had an invited studio audience. However, the audience was totally excluded in the whole discussion. There was even no visual of audience in the studio. The only time they were acknowledged in the programme was when the anchor person thanked them for attending the session. In the other two programmes, the talk shows consisted of only the anchor person, invited guests and the studio crew. The programmes were meant

to be transmitted to the audience at home. In this sense, it is clear that public involvement in discussion is non-existent. Rather than getting them involved as active audience who are able to express their views on the topic discussed, the public in these programmes is treated as merely spectator of the programmes.

In this particular context, the notion of 'public sphere' that is available in Malaysian television is only appropriate to be described as an arena where dominant ideologies in society are circulated, that is to maintain the status quo of the ruling elite and to affirm the position of certain groups in the Malaysian society. The outlook is such, due to the current climate of the politics and economy of media institutions in Malaysia that is highly controlled by the government and dominated by men. As long as Malaysian 'media environment' remains, Habermas' notion of public sphere and the role of media in perpetuating democratic space for every section in society, would be nearly impossible to accomplish let alone put into practice.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Religion: Shows which focus on issues related to Islam as core principles in daily life involving family, work, relationship, personal development matters, with invited guests among experts in the field.
Sports: Shows which discuss issues related to sports with invited guests consisting of sportsmen or experts in sports.
Entertainment: Shows which consist of discussions about the entertainment industry by guests who are singers, actors, composers or directors, and segments of musical performances.
Variety: Multi-segmented shows which cover a broad range of topics such as health, cooking, beauty, banking and crafts. Guests are from diverse backgrounds relating to the topics.
Business: Primarily involve discussions about latest developments in business, banking or management. Guests consist of either practitioners or experts in the field
Politics: Shows which focus mainly on issues related to international and local politics. Guests consist of political leaders or experts in the field.
Youth: Shows which discuss and aim towards engaging youth in issues like health, relationships, education and technology.
Current Affairs: Shows which cover a broad spectrum of current topics relating to the general Malaysian public with guests among different backgrounds including experts and industry players.
Women: Shows which focus on women's health, cooking, craft, beauty and fashion among others. Guests consist mainly of experts, industry players, artists or homemakers.