

Sachay Sawal: Connecting citizens and political candidates in Pakistan 2013 general elections.

Sachay Sawal (True questions) was a series of four electoral debates broadcast by BBC Media Action in Pakistan during the May 2013 general elections. The debates were designed to create an opportunity for ordinary Pakistanis to question political candidates on key issues of concern. BBC Media Action research reflects the appetite of Pakistanis for the programme, and its particular appeal to groups that are typically marginalised from the political process – women and youth.

The project

Sachay Sawal aired on both television and radio and aimed to create an opportunity for ordinary Pakistanis to access and question political candidates on key issues of concern during the election period. The debates were filmed on location in different places across the country with live audiences and hosted candidates from all major political parties.

Research approach

In June 2013, following the broadcasts of *Sachay Sawal*, BBC Media Action, in partnership with

BBC marketing, communications and audiences department, surveyed 4,095 people across all provinces. The survey was nationally representative of Pakistan's population aged 15+ and measured media consumption habits in the country as well as the reach and audience response to *Sachay Sawal*. In addition, studio audience feedback was collected through questionnaires completed at the end of each programme.

“It was excellent in terms of election information.”

Audience Member (Female, 20–30 years old, Islamabad)

Key Findings

- **8.8 million people** in Pakistan watched or listened to at least one episode of *Sachay Sawal*, equivalent to 7.5% of the adult population. More than half of the audience, constituting 3.8% of the adult population of Pakistan (4.5 million people) watched or listened to more than one debate. In the context of a short-running series and a competitive and saturated pre-elections media environment, this level of exposure is a positive indication for the interest Pakistanis had in these debates.
- The audience profile reflects that women, youth, urban and more educated people were particularly likely to watch the debates, indicating that the debate format was particularly appealing for groups typically marginalised from the political

process. Specifically, 54% of the national audience of *Sachay Sawal* were women, and 61% were youth (36% aged 15–24 years, and 25% aged 25–34 years old).

- The majority of the audience at home (73%) felt that the programme provided an opportunity for ordinary people to interact directly with politicians and question them about issues important to them. The audience both at home (72%) and in the studio (74%) agreed that the programme is likely to make Pakistani leaders more accountable and to contribute to holding the government responsible for its actions.
- The audiences were pleased with the topics chosen for the four debates. 82% of the respondents who had watched the debates on TV or the web, or listened to them on the radio, and 79% of the live studio audience members, said the information they received from *Sachay Sawal* was relevant to their lives.
- However, audiences were less pleased with the quality of the answers offered by some panel members, which were described as “the usual politician speak” (Woman, 20–30 years old, Karachi).

Project context

General elections were held in Pakistan on 11 May 2013 to elect the members of the 14th National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies. This was the first time in Pakistan’s history in which power was to be transferred from one democratically elected government to another following the successful completion of a full term in power. The excitement in the build-up to the elections day was accompanied by concern that public mistrust in the elections might pose a threat to the fragile democratic system in Pakistan and lead to political violence nationwide.¹ *Sachay Sawal* took part in the effort to engage Pakistanis in this historic democratic process, specifically focusing on engaging

¹ International Crisis Group (March 2011), *Reforming Pakistan’s Electoral System*, Asia No. 203 [online] Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/pakistan/203%20Reforming%20Pakistan%20Electoral%20System.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2014]

younger voters in the electoral process.

Twenty-two per cent of the Pakistani population is 15–24 years old (and 56% of the population is under 24)², yet this group has historically been under-represented in the political system, and least motivated to engage with politics.³ By inviting mainly young audience members to participate in the debates, and focusing on a new generation of political candidates as panellists, the programme aimed at mainstreaming the views of young people and empowering them to participate in the political process.

Implications and impact

It is clear from the research that there was an appetite for the *Sachay Sawal* debates, and it resonated with audiences in a highly saturated media market during the election period. Feedback has stressed the importance of the opportunity that the debates provided for Pakistanis to interact directly with their political candidates during the election period. Furthermore, the research showed that the majority of *Sachay Sawal*’s home audience members were youth and women, reflecting the programme’s success in engaging groups that are typically marginalised in political discourse.

“The programme was very good because it creates a space for people and politicians to talk to each other”

Audience Member (Male, 20–30 years old, Islamabad)

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²Central Intelligence Agency (2014), *The World Factbook* Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pk.html> [Accessed 20 January 2014]

³The British Council (November 2009) *Pakistan: The Next Generation* [online] Available from: <http://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/britishcouncil.pk/files/next-generation-report.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2014]