[MT] Broadcasting Authority Directive on Broadcast of Debates between Party Leaders

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On 16 January 2013 the Broadcasting Authority issued, for the first time, a Directive setting out rules to be followed in debates between the leaders of the political parties during the election campaign aired on the broadcasting media. In its Directive the Authority stated that it wanted to ensure that in debates between the leaders of political parties and between their deputy leaders, equal treatment is afforded to them not only in so far as the allocation of time was concerned but also in so far as the behaviour of presenters and the audience was concerned. The Directive puts all the responsibility for ensuring fair treatment of the leaders and deputy leaders of political parties on the producer, presenter and broadcasting station. Ultimately it is the registered editor of the broadcasting station who has to bear the brunt of administrative proceedings before the Authority.

The Authority's Directive also addresses the role of the audience during such programmes which might, if not regulated, disturb the balance of a programme. The audience has to be equally distributed in such a way as to reflect the views of participants and political parties involved. No clapping or other form of interruption is allowed during such debates except at the beginning and the end of the programme. The audience should be given a copy of the rules of behaviour during the programme and such rules should be agreed to by the political parties and the producer. Where members of the public pose questions to the leaders, such questions have to be given to the producer before the programme begins. The criterion for selection of questions should be impartiality, balance and fairness (in the sense of equal treatment). Audience questions should reflect equal treatment of the participants in the debate.

Questions should be relevant to the political debate in the country. During the debate the same number of questions has to be addressed to the participants. Members of the audience, when asking questions, should limit themselves to posing the questions without adding frivolous comments or supplementary questions. No cutaways or reactions of individual members of the audience are allowed whilst one of the speakers is answering a question. A close-up of a member of the audience is permitted whilst s/he is posing the question. A cutaway shot of an individual member of the audience is allowed only when one of the leaders or deputy leaders is specifically addressing the individual member posing the question. Group and wide shots of the audience are allowed during the

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debate. If these shots are used during the reply of both leaders they have to be distributed equally.

The Directive also addresses the role of presenters. The presenter has to ensure that the leaders abide by the time allotted to them. S/he has to ensure that the programme is a lively one and that the participants are given equal treatment. It is not the presenter's role to pass comments on the leaders' interventions and replies, but s/he may ask in a fair way about facts that emerge from questions posed. It is not the task of the presenter to take part in the discussion: his or her role is restricted to posing questions and conducting the programme in a just, impartial, fair and balanced way. The presenter has to ensure that the programme is conducted in a civilised way, does not allow interruptions when the leaders are talking and uses every element of her/his skill to ensure that viewers can follow what is being stated by the leaders. The presenter should not make any gesticulation, signs or movements that could distract the attention of the leaders.

Finally, in so far as programme structure is concerned, the participants have to be at their respective allocated places before the programme starts. The presenter has to introduce the participants and invite them, one after another, to introduce themselves within one-and-a half-minutes or such other length of time that may be agreed to beforehand by the participants. The audience may, in each part of the programme, pose up to two questions or such other number of questions as may be agreed beforehand with the participants. The participants will be given equal time to answer questions. Part of the programme will be an open debate between the participants, who will be given identical camera work. The participants are entitled to a concluding address of the same time allocation. The order of the debate is as follows: the Leader of the Opposition introduces; the Prime Minister concludes. In the case of a debate between the deputy leaders, an agreement should be reached between the party representatives and the producer and, should no agreement be reached, the order is established by lot. The order of the speakers has to be inserted in the running order of the programme.

The subjects to be discussed should be agreed upon between the producer and the party representatives. This will ensure impartiality and fair treatment. No televoting question can be asked as to whom of the leaders performed well. The station is required that in the case of a televoting question on a political matter to broadcast a tablethat states that televoting does not constitute a scientific survey and that the result does not necessarily reflect general opinion.

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