

PROBLEM-SOLVING TALK SHOWS ON THE TELEVISION: AN IMPRESSIONISTIC REVIEW

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Abstract

At least two Tamil TV channels - Captain TV and Zee Tamil - telecast, on a daily basis (five days a week), problem-solving interviews with clients seeking solutions to their troubles ranging from alcoholism, broken promises, being cheated of one's money, and infidelity, among others. The female anchors listen to the narration patiently, ask questions in between, offer advice and guidance, and try to find solutions. These may include reconciliation, mediation and arbitration - or all of these on an informal basis. There are other attempted solutions that need elaboration. The programmes are officially titled "Nothing but the Truth" (Solvadellam Unmai) and "Let's Chat Heart-to- Heart" (Manam Vittu Pessuvom), by Zee Tamil and Captain TV respectively. In this article, they will be referred to as SU and MVP respectively (incidentally, the second programme has since folded up). The present write-up narrates several of the newer stories and suggests improvements in the general conduct of talk shows. Also, how reality shows can be utilized by social work teachers to enhance their training potential has been discussed.

Note: The present account has not been authorized by the media or their channels. It is not being done at anyone's behest. Further, as per the law, no authorization seems necessary for offering legitimate criticism or commentary on the media's programmes in a democracy.

Keywords: Problem-solving, reality talk shows, case review, social work training

Introduction

'Review', in this context, refers to the authors' attempts to recall and narrate briefly the stories telecast by the two Tamil channels (details of which are given below), illustrating the problems faced by their clients and how they were helped.

This does not, however, propose to be an exhaustive presentation of all cases telecast during the reference period 2014-2015. Cases have been primarily selected to throw light on the variety of problems highlighted by the programmes, and the different ways in which they were resolved.

Further, this article has not been authorized by any channel, media, individual or organization.

The term 'impressionistic' refers to the largely subjective views of the authors regarding the significance of the cases and the manner in which they were dealt with by the counsellor.

Objectives of the Review Exercise

The principal purpose of talk shows like these is to resolve the hardships experienced and voiced by the clientele - in other words, problem-solving. That is, the objectives of the talk shows and those of professional social workers are near- identical: only the approach and methods adopted differ. Having the same objectives, social workers would do well to take note of the problem-solving exercises undertaken by the media and examine the commonalities and differences between the two schools of practice, if one may call them so. If there was anything novel and useful in the approach adopted by the media, there is no reason why professional social workers should not, likewise, experiment with the same.

The primary objective of the present exercise, therefore, is to set down the facts regarding the media-based approach: firstly, in regard to interviewing, and secondly to problem-solving, so that those who had no occasion to watch these programmes will get an inkling of what the media had to offer. Surely someone has to record of this new development, and the writers have decided to do so.

The major objective was to focus attention on the interview process to see if social work faculty and students could learn anything new to enrich the training process. Finally, it would perhaps not be inappropriate to offer suggestions to the channel's producers that might help them sharpen the diagnostic and therapeutic segments of their practice.

The Validity of the Observations

The chroniclers have no reason to dismiss the media exercise as fake or theatrical. To all appearances, the stories and characters are real and not an elaborate make-believe. Consequently, the show is presumed to have face validity.

Independent Confirmation: The following news report independently confirms the genuineness of an episode. On June 15 & 16, 2015, SU telecast two consecutive episodes concerning the death of a young girl under mysterious circumstances, which the police had recorded as a case of suicide. In the telecasts, however, the girl's mother vociferously claimed that it was a case of murder, the suspect being the local priest. On a complaint preferred by the channel, the police had to reopen the case and are currently subjecting it to a fresh probe. This was reported by the Times of India in its two issues dated 17 & 18 June 2015.

Reliability of the Authors' Commentary

Both the writers have independently watched the shows narrated here, compared notes, and found, by and large, a close concurrence of views regarding the events taking place and the conclusions arrived at. Thus, inter-observer (some would call it inter-judge) reliability can be said to have been established. Heynes (1970), for example, says that reliability depends on the extent of agreement among the observers.

There is also reason to believe that while the interviews are genuine, they may have been rehearsed in advance to clarify issues and establish the sequence of events to avert any confusion on the part of the viewers following them. In other words, the advance rehearsals in this case are designed to contribute to clarity rather than hoodwink the viewer by dishing out fiction.

The Social Work Perspective

The term 'counselling' includes working with individuals and relationships which may involve issues with development, crisis support, psychotherapy, guidance or problem-solving. The task of counselling is to give the 'client' an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more satisfyingly and resourcefully (British Association for Counselling, 1984).

Be that as it may, can the above activity be called counselling in the accepted sense? Perhaps not, and there are several reasons for this. First, the whole problem-solving session lasts just an hour, with commercial advertisements taking away at least 15-20 minutes. Trained social workers firmly believe that human problems cannot be solved in such a short span of time. Especially, psychoanalytically-oriented social workers believe that quite a few sessions are needed to diagnose problems (Aptekar, 1955 and Thomas et al., 1995).

Secondly, orthodox social workers believe that counselling should not be offered when others are watching. But the television reality show has dispensed with this requirement, its very purpose being that it be watched. For the reasons above as well as others, the programmes could, at best, be described as ones with limited aims, limited terms, informal counselling and social service assistance.

Thirdly, the credentials of the counsellors must be known to determine the professional status of the assistance provided. In the present case, they are unknown and perhaps unknowable (in this write-up, the terms anchor and counsellor are used interchangeably).

Finally, it should be stated here that the Zee Tamil channel's efforts at problemsolving cannot be deemed to be professional social work practice. Of late, the anchor has got into the habit of berating erring clients rather severely, using sarcasm and mockery to shame them. She

criticises the way they are dressed and even asks, 'Do you have any sense at all?' Such practices are, of course, anathema to professional social work.

FORMS OF ASSISTANCE

Presented in this section is a glimpse of the nature of the challenges faced by clients, and the anchors' problem-solving approach.

In the case of a client who was a young mother abandoned by her husband, and forced to take shelter at the Chennai Mofussil Bus Terminus at Koyambedu every night because she had no home of her own, the anchor (SU), shocked at her plight, offered her a wad of currency notes and asked her to rent a house immediately.

In another case, the anchor (MVP) promised to find a new job for the husband whose present employment was not lucrative enough. In yet another case, the same anchor promised to find affordable rented accommodation.

As alcoholism is a major problem in many cases, the anchors almost routinely arrange for clients' treatment in a de-addiction facility. Also, personnel from the centre are invited for sessions with the anchors and clients to discuss the issue.

Incest: A 57-year-old man, charged by his wife and a daughter of making incestuous advances, refuted the allegation. The family was advised to lodge a complaint with the police.

In yet another case, the client's husband suddenly and mysteriously expired. To rule out foul play, the anchor informed the client that she was constrained to refer the matter to the police for investigations.

An assault: A burly school teacher had stabbed his wife, the mother of his three children (the eldest a college-goer) six times in the abdomen over a triviality. At first, the wife had filed a case against him, but later the same woman - victim of the knife attacks - came to his rescue and lied to the court, saying that her injuries were accidental. Consequently, the man escaped punishment but the family rejected him. They did not want to live with him anymore, despite the anchor's plea that he be given a 'second chance'. The channel announced that they would sponsor the education of the college-going girl. It is not

clear why the anchor did not think of arranging for psychiatric treatment for the teacher.

A family reunion: A baby girl was given away by a family to an orphanage under difficult circumstances. Twenty-five years later, the girl is a young married woman with a child, and gets to her biological family. It is an emotional moment which leaves everyone in tears, including the counsellor. The channel's reporters had successfully traced the young mother, on the basis of the scanty information about her past that was made available to them. The young woman, however, was disconsolate that her family had decided to give her away.

A midget girl: A father brought his 11-year-old midget daughter, studying in standard five, to the programme and requested medical help so she could grow up normally. A medical consultation was also promised.

Most certainly the cases presented in the programme are diverse. Almost always, the anchors provide some relief to the help-seeker, who does not return empty-handed. Appropriate background music, combined with slick production, enhance the effectiveness of the presentation.

Pre-Show Preparation

The shows' anchors arrange for prior investigation of the cases by sending their 'reporters' to the field to make enquiries (and search for a missing/absconding person when, for example, a complaint is lodged by a client).

Emotional support: Every abandoned woman is firmly reassured that she is not alone in her quest for justice, and that the channel stands squarely with her.

A stern warning: The anchors often speak to the camera and sternly warns deserters/absconders that they will be tracked down and brought to justice, wherever they might choose to flee as fugitives. Truly, the channels go all out to help their clients and nail offenders.

No coercion: The anchors do not impose their views on clients. On every occasion, they are at their persuasive best and advise clients strongly that a particular course of action is in their best interests but

leave the final decision to the clients themselves. It is gratifying that the principle of client self-determination is scrupulously followed every time.

No quickfix solutions: It appears, on the surface, as if the channels are bent on quick-fix solutions to complex human relationship problems in the course of an hour's programme. Actually, that is not the case at all. The anchors do a great deal of homework, studying the case reports brought in by the investigators in question and negotiate with the client and those close to him/her (sometimes over the phone) before a solution is arrived at and offered for the client's consideration. Certainly things are kept moving fast, but no hasty solution is arrived at or offered.

Committed to the cause of children: Both the channels emphasise the importance of safeguarding the well-being of children in all cases. Their education is not to be jeopardised under any circumstances, and the anchors repeatedly remind their clients of this noble ideal. They persuade, with all the conviction they can muster, couples on the verge of separation to unite, if only for the children's sake. They make an impassioned plea to the incorrigible tippler to try and give up drinking for his dear child's sake.

In a case reported widely by the press, the client revealed she had entered into a homicidal plot with a man and both had choked her alcoholic spouse to death. The matter was promptly reported to the police (SU). The miscreants have been arrested and await trial.

Sponsorship: Not infrequently, the channels have undertaken to bear the expenses incurred in the the e treatment and rehabilitation of severely-0disabled clients with no means. They have also volunteered to bear the costs of higher education for children disowned by their parents, who would much rather pressure their wards to marry than finance their education.

THE EMPATHETIC APPROACH

Of late, the Zee Tamil anchor has frequently been observed hugging female clients in distress to comfort and reassure them. In the most recent episode, the counsellor assured the female client who had

conceived out of wedlock, and whose husband was absconding, that all efforts would be made to trace him and reunite them.

In a somewhat unexpected move, however, the anchor and her team arranged for a 'valaikappu' ritual for the client's benefit. The client concerned had expressed a desire for the ceremony, which involves adorning a pregnant woman with flowers and slipping dozens of bangles around her wrists.

Usually done when a woman is pregnant and due for confinement, it is generally a family function arranged for by the parents and female relatives to bless the woman for a safe delivery. At this bizarre event, no relatives - including the parents - were present, the husband had given the young woman the slip, and it took place in the TV studio. What was evident, however, was the anchor's earnest desire to fulfil the client's fond wish.

Suggestions to the Anchor/Producer

In the programmes discussed above, the anchors occasionally tend to lose patience with intractable and defiant clients and tell them to shut up. Such harshness is best avoided. Likewise, the channels need show no trailers (clippings of events slated to appear in actual future shows) in advance. Further, music and cinematic special effects in the background are entirely unnecessary.

It is suggested that the show remains as close to reality as possible. Further, it is recommended that the anchors refrain from appearing in commercial advertisements to endorse products. To be taken seriously by clients, anchors must not be seen as glamorous models, even occasionally, but only as public-spirited activists. In addition, arrangements should be made to take care of children separately when the adults are being interviewed.

Frequently, clients shed tears as they narrate their sorrowful tales. The anchors must have handkerchiefs or tissue ready for such occasions.

As far as possible, every client in a given case should be interviewed separately and in privacy. In a reality television show, friends and relatives are present when a client's problems are being discussed in detail. The children, too, are often present when their parents' problems

- including indebtedness, and extramarital and premarital relationships, are openly discussed (especially in MVP).

After the deluge: After the recent 2015 Chennai Floods, the residents of a particular locality sought the channel's help in cleaning up a temple. A lot of mud and slush had to be cleared from the premises inside and outside. The walls had become caked with mud. The devotees found the place unusable until normalcy could be restored. Half a dozen personnel from the SU Zee Tamil channel, wearing masks and gloves and armed with suitable equipment, completed the job of restoration within a few hours, sprucing up the temple.

The only flaw was that the local people had not been involved. It was as if the SU team wanted to show that it could accomplish the task single-handedly. We would like the channel staff to know that when we need to do something for the community, the community's participation has to be ensured in the task being carried out. This principle is basic in professional social work practice.

Further, the channel could devote at least one session a month to a review and follow-up of old cases (at present, such reviews are few and far apart).

Is there anything in these talk shows that could help improve social work practice and training? The answer is a tentative 'yes' (tentative, as it has to be experimented with and proven acceptable and profitable). For example, faculty and student trainees can focus their attention on the interview process.

These two reality programmes are a good substitute for the traditional one-way mirror that psychologists have used since time immemorial. Attached to a wall of a chamber where the counselling takes place is a full length mirror: at least, it looks like one from the inside. But it is actually a plain see-through glass on the other side of the wall where trainees can sit and watch the counselling session. Those inside the chamber, especially the client, will not know he/she is being watched. This arrangement gives the learner watching through the glass the opportunity to see what counselling is really like. What they see and learn will be discussed, and clarifications provided by the teacher will

help students learn the ropes. The problem-solving reality show can be used as a training tool of instruction by the teacher.

Watching these programmes will have a salutary effect on both students and teachers of counselling psychology and social work. Watching should invariably be followed by discussion on such issues as (besides others):

1. The nature of the problem under review.
2. The diagnosis: Who are the persons that need help? Of what kind?
3. The interview process: plus and minus points, dos and don'ts.
4. The strong and weak points of the counselling process.
5. How would each student have handled the same problem differently? Why?

Sociological Insights - A Bonus

Incidentally, traditional customs and mores of rural and urban clients and their relatives often come to the fore in these programmes. An example is the way in which they symbolically and ritually emphasise that they are speaking the truth. A woman may remove the sacred *thali* from around her neck and place it on the floor to indicate that she is telling the truth. Similarly, a man may place his folded towel on the floor and step over it. These acts amount to a solemn oath that they are speaking nothing but the truth. At least one client reported how she was asked to prove her innocence by holding ignited camphor in her palm and taking an oath before a deity. Had she been lying, it is believed that her palm would have been severely burnt. Students of social work will profit from an exposure to these cultural practices that surface during the problem-solving process. This is an added benefit that awaits the watcher.

Conclusion

In sum, for Indian television viewers, the problem-solving talk show is an eye opener. Viewers have the opportunity to come to grips with issues they would have otherwise been unaware of. After watching the proceedings, many might consider sharing their concerns or seeking professional help for the challenges they face. The secret of the apparent success of the programme seems to be twofold: the first may

be called the 'jury effect' and the second, 'perceived clout'. The 'jury effect' refers to the fact that the clients are well aware, all through the proceedings, that their performance is being watched by an impartial jury, namely, a TV audience of vast proportions. They know that they cannot lie their way out of the problem, which is mostly of their own making. They also know it would be unseemly to be intractable and stubborn and adopt a denial mode when the facts are staring them in the face. Hence, they accept a compromise solution instead of a mulish insistence on having their own way. The second factor of 'perceived clout' is the fact that the channels command the respect of the Police Department, which is likely to do all they can to book offenders and provide relief to the channel's law-abiding clients. This awareness has a sobering influence on clients, inspires confidence and a willingness to comply with the law. The Police Department would do well to give all NGOs dealing with similar issues the same kind of support, as in this case. It is a worthy cause to which the audience, too, should lend their support.

Future Prospects

Social workers everywhere increasingly have to work with individuals, such as victims of incest, those with multiple sexual partners (a second and third spouse), and alcoholism. No easy solutions have emerged from the channels' own experience. For example, how do you tackle problems created by a man on an income that is inadequate to maintain a wife and children, and yet takes a second partner and fathers one or more children from the second?

This question needs to be debated at length. At least two separate cases of lesbianism were addressed by the channels. In one case, the pair was persuaded to terminate their relationship.

In these reality shows, problem-solving is not a one-day event. A team of investigators (known officially as reporters) visits the client's place and gathers relevant information from friends and key relatives and prepares a report for the anchor's use. Wherever needed, even the police co-operate with them fully and supply the channel the information at their disposal. Armed with such vital data, the anchor is able to discuss and stage an intervention during the one-hour session.

The institution of Corporate Social Responsibility Rules in India came into effect in April 2014. It is reassuring that addressing issues through the involvement of business houses can have a positive impact on the community, culture, and society in which corporations operate. Under the Companies Act, 2013, any company with a net worth of Rs 500 crores or more, or a turnover of Rs 1,000 crores or more, or a net profit of Rs 5 crores or more should mandatorily spend at least 2% of the last 3 years' average net profits on CSR activities, as specified in Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013, and as amended from time to time. Social workers could get help from companies to mobilise funds to provide credible and instantaneous assistance to needy clients. This is only one option; other alternatives need to be explored. The task is challenging, and mechanisms need to be developed so the needy can be helped.

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