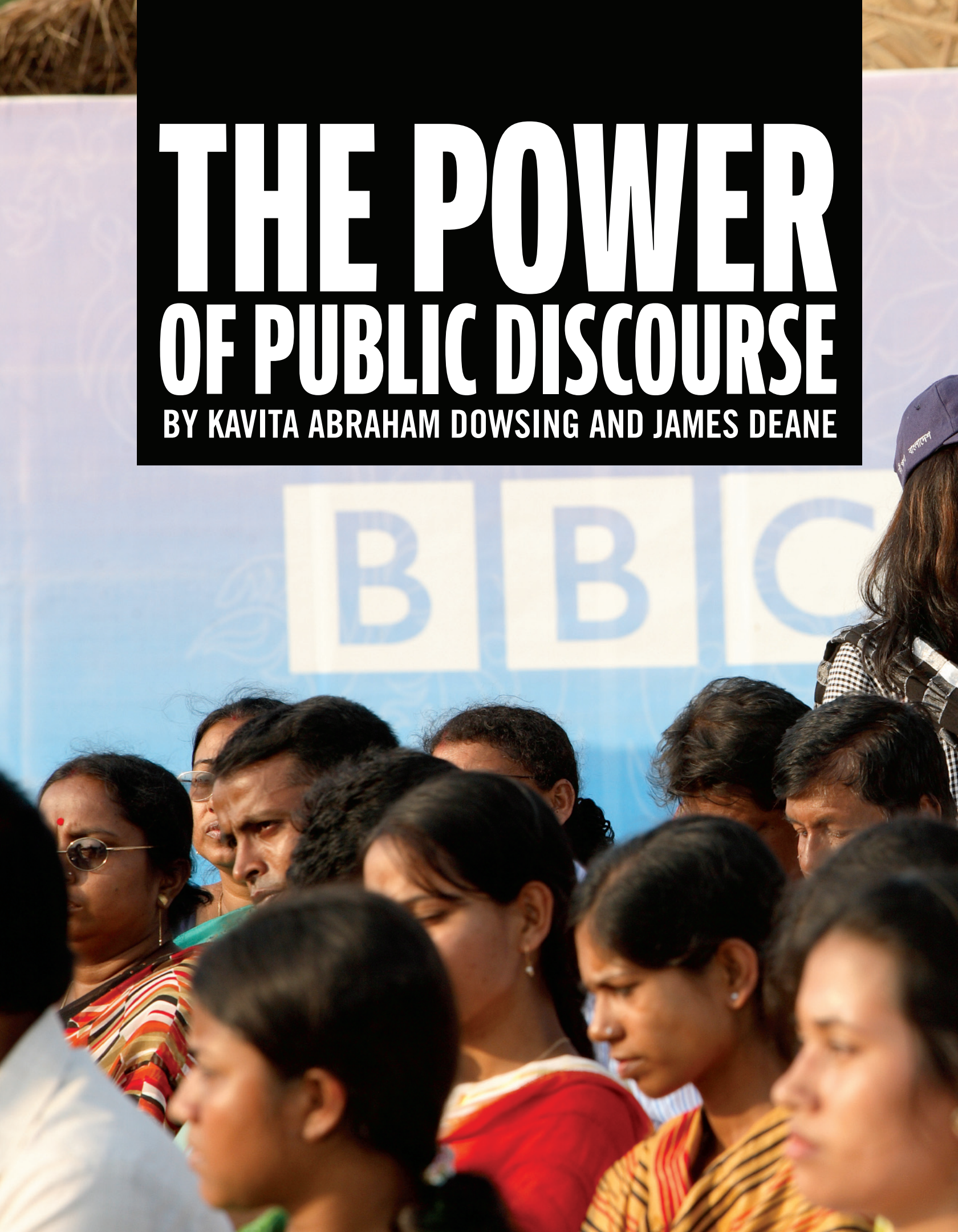# THE POWER
OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE
BY KAVITA ABRAHAM DOWSING AND JAMES DEANE

People voice their concerns at a BBC *Sanglap* (dialogue) in Mongla, Bangladesh, 2007.

The concept of open development presupposes a greatly increased supply of information available to citizens on the issues, products, and services that shape their lives. It means that:

- governments should make information on budgets accessible and intelligible,

- local authorities should provide access to information about the provision of services that citizens can expect, and

- donors should be transparent about what they are spending, specifying for *what* and *why*, and doing so in forms that beneficiaries can use.

DEMANDING GOOD GOVERNANCE

THE DEMAND for such information is expected to come from citizens, particularly those who believe that money (whether from government revenues, taxes, or donor funds) allocated to improving their schools, clinics, or roads is not being spent effectively. The demand is also expected to come from civil society and media, those who are able to make sense of often complex information. An ideal objective of most accountability initiatives that make up the open development paradigm is to make this information accessible to those whose lives it most affects.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

THE PURPOSE OF ALL THIS is to create a shift in the power relationship *from* the institutions and governments, whose responsibility it is to provide services and improve lives, *to* the people whom those services are supposed to benefit. That power can be effectively exercised by small groups of citizens working together to identify and confront politicians or service providers who are failing to deliver the services for which money is available. Because corruption and political or self-interest are heavily entrenched, more open development is unlikely to have the desired effects unless various publics are able, collectively and peacefully, to exert public influence.

The governance work of the BBC World Service Trust (the BBC's international charity) helps public groups to access information and to debate issues with their political leaders. This is done at large, at scale and in real time, using a combination of mass media to catalyze and facilitate public discourse. It does not campaign or insist on action on any specific issue but rather provides national or local platforms for public policy debate. The pressure for accountable governance emanates from the scale, visibility, and credibility of the public discourse in which political leaders and ordinary people engage.

CREATING SPACE FOR CHANGE

THREE EXAMPLES of the Trust's work are highlighted here. They range from providing broadcast infrastructure and the creation of a new broadcaster in southern Iraq, to media programming that provides fora for exchanging and disseminating ideas and information among the public at large.

SCALING UP THROUGH THE AIRWAVES

AL MIRBAD is an Iraqi radio station built, managed, and operated by Iraqis in southern Iraq. Its purpose was to build social cohesion and political accountability. Extensive quantitative and qualitative research guided its design. It reached about one third of all radio listeners in the region every week, or some 700,000 people. The program was highly engaging, drawing more than 90,000 calls to the program over three years to raise or respond to issues of governance.

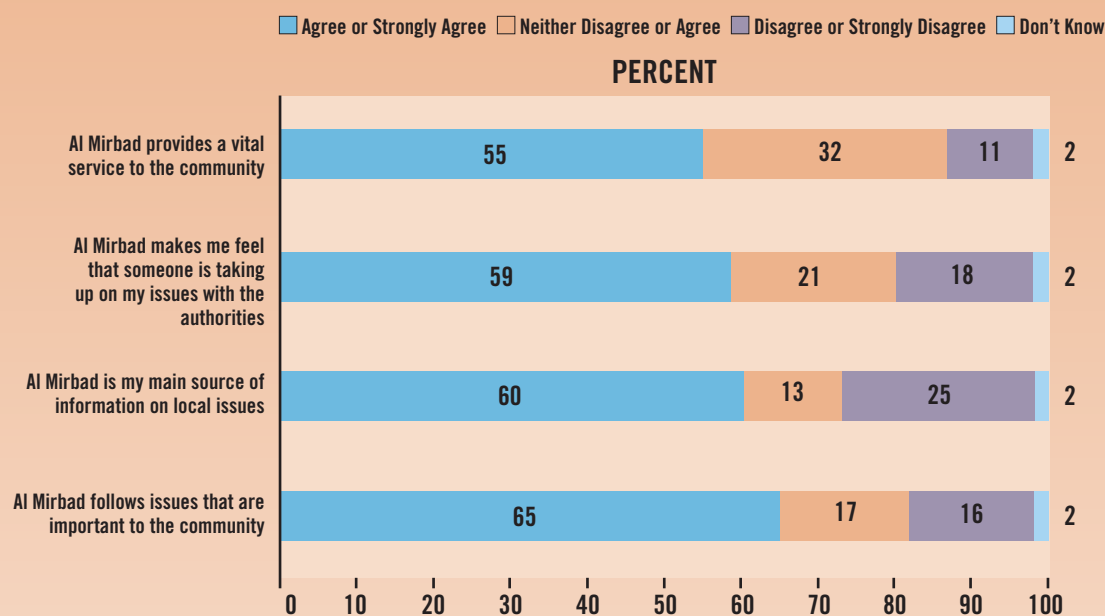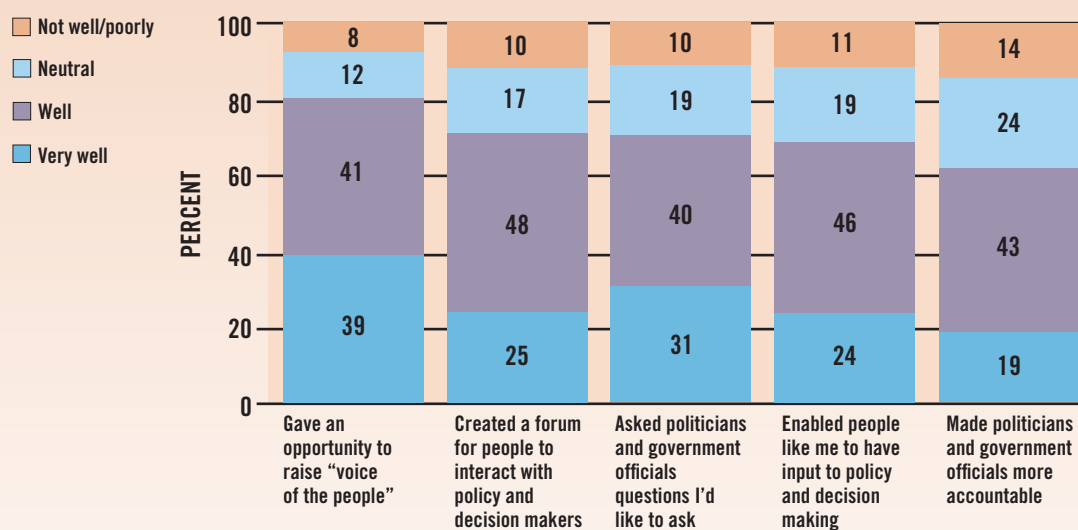## FIGURE 1: PERCEPTIONS OF AL MIRBAD'S PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

■ Agree or Strongly Agree □ Neither Disagree or Agree ■ Disagree or Strongly Disagree ■ Don't Know

PERCENT

	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Al Mirbad provides a vital service to the community	55	32	11	2
Al Mirbad makes me feel that someone is taking up on my issues with the authorities	59	21	18	2
Al Mirbad is my main source of information on local issues	60	13	25	2
Al Mirbad follows issues that are important to the community	65	17	16	2

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

FIGURE 2: WHAT LISTENERS THOUGHT ABOUT THE SANGLAP PROGRAM IN BANGLADESH

□ Not well/poorly
■ Neutral
■ Well
■ Very well

PERCENT

	Gave an opportunity to raise "voice of the people"	Created a forum for people to interact with policy and decision makers	Asked politicians and government officials questions I'd like to ask	Enabled people like me to have input to policy and decision making	Made politicians and government officials more accountable
Not well/poorly	8	10	10	11	14
Neutral	12	17	19	19	24
Well	41	48	40	46	43
Very well	39	25	31	24	19

The BBC WST has designed similar public debate programs in Nepal and Angola.

IN BANGLADESH, the BBC World Service Trust worked with the BBC and national partners to create Bangladesh Sanglap which means *dialogue* in Bangla: a national political discussion show based on the BBC's *Question Time* format, in which a panel of politicians and public figures responds to questions posed by a studio audience made up of citizens.

Before the launch of Bangladesh Sanglap, two studies were done to measure public perceptions of governance and political discourse in Bangladesh. Citizens identified several sources of frustration and disillusionment with politicians: their *blame game habit,*[1] their tendency to use language that few understood, and their avoidance of constructive discussion about solutions to the nation's problems. A national opinion survey of 5,000 people, found that:

■ trust in government officials (39 percent) was lower than trust in religious leaders, intellectuals, and the army,

■ fifty-nine percent did not consider politicians in Bangladesh to be accountable to the public, and

■ only 23 percent felt government put national interests before political (party) interests.

In total, 153 episodes of Sanglap were broadcast, most of them outside of Dhaka and often in rural and very poor areas. They attracted audiences of

A BBC Sanglap in Mongla, Bangladesh, 2007.

up to 21 million people (more than a fifth of the population). Senior political and other prominent figures consistently took part in the program. Figure 2 summarizes the results of national follow-up surveys.

GIVING VOICE THROUGH THE MEDIA

FINALLY, IN NIGERIA, the BBC WST Budget Monitoring project worked with the Integrity Organisation, a national anticorruption NGO, to form community groups or Integrity Clubs. Six Integrity Clubs, made up of a coalition of various civil society organizations, were formed in each of the project's six focal states. Each club identified and pursued issues of concern to the local people in collaboration with the journalists who were being trained in public finance reporting as part of the project. The Integrity Organisation, whose key staff were sufficiently well placed to have access to them, provided the clubs with key documents such as state budgets to support their investigations.

In Kano State, the Integrity Club investigated funding for Universal Basic Education (UBE) because there was a widely held view that, despite huge resource allocations, the UBE program had recorded abysmal performance. The club carried out a field survey to assess UBE's funding and expenditures, counting chairs, tables, and teachers. Initial findings revealed that expenditure levels did not match delivery.

In Anambra State, before the Integrity Club took up the cause, a perennial lack of potable water in Achina had led citizens to give up hope of any change. This issue was discussed at one of the Integrity Club meetings, and picked up by journalists who had been trained under the project. The media reports, as well as advocacy visits and activities with local town unions, compelled the state government to allocate 50 million naira in the 2008 budget for the Achina water project.

These three examples from the work of the BBC World Service Trust demonstrate the role of the media in creating platforms for open debate and discussion and a space where citizens can create democratic change for themselves and their societies. □

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Endnote

1 *Blame game* is a rough translation of a Bengali language term used to describe dialogues that involve harangue, counteraccusations, and rebuttals to explain or justify a problematic situation or practice.