6.1   At the Chairman's invitation, the Secretary for Information Technology and Broadcasting (SITB), Mrs Carrie YAU, briefed members on the priority tasks of her Bureau (Appendix V-5).

Broadcasting

Radio 5

6.2   Mr TAM Yiu-chung pointed out that as Radio 5 of the Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) was an amplitude moderation (AM) channel, there were reception problems which caused much inconvenience, in particular to the elderly audience.   To improve the quality of the broadcast programmes, Mr TAM enquired on the progress in introducing digital radio broadcasting and whether more programmes dedicated to elderly audience would be produced.

6.3   In response, SITB said that digital radio broadcasting would not be implemented in the near future in view of its high costs. The Director of Broadcasting (D of B) supplemented that while digital radio broadcasting could overcome the problem of quality inconsistency among programmes transmitted at different moderations, the technology for digital radio broadcasting had not reached its mature stage and was not widely used worldwide. Regarding programmes for the elderly, SITB said that consideration would be given to strengthening programme contents to cater for the needs and interest of elderly listeners.

6.4   As regards remedial measures to improve reception of Radio 5 programmes, in particular those targeted at elderly people such as the Radio College for the Elderly, D of B explained that to improve reception at new towns, RTHK had set up a small frequency moderation (FM) transmission station in Castle Peak and Tseung Kwan O.   RTHK would continue to work closely with the Information Technology and Broadcasting Bureau (ITBB) and the Office of the Telecommunications Authority in setting up more small FM transmission stations where necessary.

Webcasting

6.5   Noting that the financial provision for the Internet distribution of RTHK's programme contents would be met by internal resource redeployment instead of by additional funding, Mr SIN Chung-kai considered it justified to include webcasting or new media activities as an independent programme area under the relevant Head of Expenditure in the Annual Estimates owing to the growing importance of and demand for such services.   He also found it

worthwhile to formalize the Internet distribution of some well-received or award-winning programmes produced in the past such as "Below the Lion Rock".

6.6   In this connection, D of B confirmed that new media activities had been identified as a major initiative in RTHK's five-year strategic plan in view of its increasing popularity.   Meanwhile, RTHK was also looking into possible forms of strategic partnership so as to enhance the development of multi-media services, such as the distribution of RTHK's programme contents on the Internet through public-private-partnership.   D of B envisaged that given further development, new media activities would likely form an independent programme area for the purpose of the Annual Estimates of Expenditure in due course.

Cultural education

6.7   Noting that one of RTHK's tasks ahead was the production of cultural programmes to strengthen the public's appreciation of art and culture, Ms Emily LAU expressed concern on the cost-effectiveness of this area of work and how the general public's level of appreciation could be heightened.

6.8   In response, D of B highlighted RTHK's responsibility as a public broadcaster.   To enhance the public's appreciation of art and culture, a radio channel (Radio 4) dedicated to serious music and fine arts was provided.   He nevertheless agreed that the audienceship for Radio 4 was relatively small. As regards other classical music and arts performances, the recent live broadcast of "Yundi LI & Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra Live" and "Yo Yo MA & the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra Live" during TV prime-time had been well-received , drawing some 200 000 to 300 000 viewers.   RTHK would continue to collaborate with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and various organizers in broadcasting more live/relay concerts such as those presented by Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, and Asian Youth Orchestra.   D of B also informed members that a series of four episodes presented by conductor Samuel Wong on music appreciation had just be delivered.   Besides, RTHK also planned to produce more episodes of cultural education in 2002 and archive them in RTHK's website and HKeducationCITY.net so that the public and students could access and retrieve them for reference afterwards.   He believed that these programmes would be instrumental in strengthening the public's appreciation of art and culture over time.

Consultancy study

6.9   Ms Cyd HO referred to the consultancy study commissioned by

RTHK at $0.82 million to formulate a 5-year strategic plan, including the development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). She was concerned that the said study commissioned in October 2001 had not been included in the consultancy studies contemplated by RTHK in its 2001-02 Estimates, and questioned the need and urgency for the study which had commenced without prior consultation.

6.10   In response, D of B advised that consultancy studies were commissioned in the light of needs which might arise in the course of a financial year. At the time of preparing the 2001-02 Estimates, there had not been any concrete plan to undertake the consultancy study in question. He also pointed out that the study had not incurred additional expenditure as its cost had been met by internal redeployment of resources. Given that the study mainly focused on personnel, resource allocation and cost efficiency of the department itself, RTHK did not consider it necessary to conduct public consultation. As to why editorial independence was not covered, D of B said that the issue was outside the scope of the study but he stressed that editorial independence was one of the values constantly pursued by RTHK.

6.11   Ms Cyd HO was gravely concerned about the discretion and lack of monitoring for individual departments to undertake consultancy studies on its own initiative as long as it could secure the necessary resources through internal redeployment. She was worried that departments would redeploy resources for consultancy studies at the expense of other planned programmes or services.

6.12   In response, D of B reiterated that in commissioning the consultancy study, RTHK had prioritized its resources to address its operational needs. On the funding arrangements, the Deputy Secretary for the Treasury advised that the provision earmarked for Subhead 149-General Departmental Expenses included expenses for hiring of services and professional fees. Under existing practice, individual Controlling Officers could commission consultancy studies costing up to $1.3 million having regard to its own operational needs. Where the cost of the study exceeded $1.3 million, prior approval from the Central Consultants Selection Board was required.

6.13   Regarding the award of the contract for the consultancy study, D of B said that after several months of preparation and tendering, the contract was awarded to the consultancy firm in October 2001. The timing coincided unexpectedly with certain controversies arising from the RTHK's programme "Headliner" as referred to by Ms Cyd HO.

Bridging the digital divide

6.14 Noting that a district cyber centre would be set up in Yuen Long at an estimated expenditure of $1.65 million, Mr SIN Chung-kai enquired whether similar facilities would be extended to other districts. He called for a review on the piece-meal provision of one or two sets of computers at community centres and considered that these resources should be pooled to set up district-level cyber centres where tutors were also available to provide on-the-spot assistance to users.

6.15 The Deputy Secretary for Information Technology and Broadcasting (2) reported that in addition to Yuen Long, the Administration was seeking other suitable locations for setting up cyber centres on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. Referring to the Super Cyber Centre in Canton Road, he confirmed that facilities and services including IT training courses and tutors provided at the Centre were very popular. Meanwhile, the Administration would continue to provide for computer facilities at community centres in view of their high usage rate.

Film services

6.16 On the proposed provision of $200,000 earmarked in 2002-03 to organize a number of activities to facilitate film financing, including thematic workshops covering the accounting system and the completion bond system for film-making, Ms Emily LAU questioned the need for these activities and their cost-effectiveness.

6.17 In response, SITB advised that the activities were planned in response to the requests of the industry. Through these activities, it was hoped that completion bond companies would be encouraged to take part in film financing activities in Hong Kong. On the effectiveness or otherwise of these activities, she informed members that one American completion bond company had already set up an office in Hong Kong to provide completion bond services.

Staffing proposal for the Cyberport project

6.18 Ms Emily LAU referred to the agreement in principle reached by the Legislative Council's Cross Party Coalition that proposals for the creation of directorate posts would unlikely be supported if such proposals involved any net increase in the overall directorate establishment of the civil service. She questioned the rationale behind ITBB's planned request for the continuation of two supernumerary directorate posts in relation to the Cyberport project and asked whether arrangement would be made to offset the proposed continuation of the posts.

6.19   In response, SITB said that the proposal to retain the two supernumerary directorate posts would have to be considered in the context of the institutional arrangements for the future management of the Cyberport.   She stressed that the posts were not new ones but renewal of existing posts.   The ITBB would prepare the detailed proposal for the consideration of the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting.   Regarding alternative arrangements, ITBB had critically examined the feasibility of meeting the staffing requirement by redeploying its existing directorate resources. However, the incumbent directorate staff were already fully stretched in their respective schedule.   The ITBB was also required to take forward a number of new initiatives such as the e-government programme.   Regarding the possibility of deleting or redeploying posts involving other bureaux to offset the proposed extension of the two directorate posts, SITB said that according to her understanding, the staffing situation in other bureaux was also very tight.   Notwithstanding, she would seek the advice of the Civil Services Bureau before putting up the proposal to the Panel.