

Submission by RTHK Programme Staff Union to the Legco Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

We are honoured to be invited to this meeting of Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel to directly express the position and view of our Union.

Summer falls in June every year. To RTHK staff, this summer is a particularly unbearable one. For, since the beginning of the month, Mr Donald Tsang, during his campaign to elect for Chief Executive, has proposed that RTHK stop broadcasting horse racing meetings and entertainment programmes. His remarks were echoed by Mr Rafael Hui, the newly-appointed Chief Secretary for Administration, and Mr John Tsang, Secretary for Commerce, Industry and Technology, who suggested that RTHK should not repeat what its commercial companies were doing, and should produce more programmes to cater for minority interests, which were not available on private channels.

It is only natural for RTHK, as a public broadcaster funded by taxpayers' money, to be accountable to the public. In the past, at different times, people from different walks of life have spoken of the types of programmes which RTHK should produce, as well as the lines to which these programmes should toe. Still, it was unheard of for leaders of the SAR to give comments in turn and reveal their intention on the issue. RTHK staff is gravely alarmed, fearing that the well-established editorial independence, which has never been challenged before, would be eroded. Over the years, we have been fully committed to the production of high-quality programmes with fairness, integrity and impartiality. Detailed instructions from senior officials will put us under great pressure.

Editorial Independence

There have been opinions that RTHK holds its editorial independence holy and sacred that it rejects any criticism. Others believe RTHK regards itself as an independent kingdom free of outside intervention, including those made by principal officials. This has not been the case.

Indeed, RTHK has never been an independent kingdom. It is monitored by Broadcasting Authority, relevant legislations and members of the public. Having said that, RTHK staff treasure the principle of 'editorial independence', which is the cornerstone of the station's credibility. Editorial independence enjoyed by the station is enshrined in the 'Framework Agreement' signed between RTHK and the government in 1995, which is the best pronouncement of government's intention to make RTHK a public broadcaster. We value it highly. RTHK's editorial line has always been impartial, balanced and objective, being timely and receptive in response to the needs of the public.

The decision on whether to scrap horse racing and the Gold Song Awards

No programme exists forever. Regular review of programme arrangements is a matter of

course. RTHK has been broadcasting horse racing meetings and Top Ten Chinese Gold Song Awards for years. The programmes' long history justifies their existence. The idea to scrap the programmes merely on the ground that private channels are offering something similar, RTHK staff believes, is dubious. In the first place, since RTHK needs not rely on commercial advertisements to produce these programmes, so the problem of competing for profit with the commercial sector does not exist. Secondly, RTHK's productions do not need commercial support, so we are free from commercial consideration and produce programmes with more open, fair and impartial manner. Thirdly, competition brings about progress. RTHK's programmes provide alternatives for the public. Their existence serves to encourage private channels to improve their production, ultimately benefiting the audience. One would only be too glad to see it happen. Finally, if RTHK is not allowed to produce any programme, which is available in the private sector, it can never take the initiative. It cannot strive for excellence. It cannot build its own brand name. It cannot offer an alternative to the public. Imagine the scenario that a private channel offers a programme similar to *Mr Heart Will Go On*. Should RTHK stop airing this programme then?

However, to RTHK staff, they worry most that when RTHK is forced to stop broadcasting widely popular, well-founded and highly acclaimed programmes, it will decline gradually. It will become out of touch with the public. It is a real waste of taxpayers' money for a public broadcaster to fail in its service to the public. It is a step backward from RTHK's commitment. This is the most worrying issue.

RTHK's audience: Majority or Minority?

Regarding the call of Mr John Tsang, Secretary for Commerce, Industry and Technology, for more programmes for minority interests by RTHK, we want to point out that the primary objective of RTHK, as a public broadcaster, is to serve the public and the minority groups. As it is stated in the 'Framework Agreement' signed between RTHK and the government, the mission of RTHK is 'to serve a broad spectrum of audiences and cater to the needs of minority interest groups.'

In fact, we have been producing many programmes for the minority groups. Our *News Review*, a television programme with simultaneous sign language for the audibly disabled, has been in production for 25 years. In recent years, there have been *Prevent Suicide* for depressed people and *Golden Age* for the elderly. We have dedicated radio channels for Putonghua speakers and fine music lovers, Cantonese opera and educational programmes. We have a long history in producing programmes for the elderly and for the promotion of art awareness.

While there is always room for improvement, we are willing to listen to the public on issues such as whether more, and also which type of, programmes for the minority interest groups are necessary. Nevertheless, we believe we are not supposed to give up the interest of the majority altogether.

The Role of RTHK

The issue on whether RTHK should relay horse racing draws attention again to the existing role and way forward of RTHK. As staff of RTHK, we also want to make use of this opportunity to enhance the public's understanding of the role of RTHK.

Being a government department, RTHK is at the same time a public broadcaster. Our duty is to inform, educate and entertain the public. Moreover, we also need to oversee the government and find out its inadequacies. Of course, some time slots are arranged for explaining government policies in order to tie in with policy developments. For example, during the election, we produced many election programmes. This year sees the 15th anniversary of the implementation of the Basic Law. On this, RTHK has produced a *Basic Law Magazine* programme. Apart from these, bureau heads and permanent secretaries are regularly invited for interviews in RTHK so as to listen to the public. Whether RTHK is doing against government policies or opposing the government, the people of Hong Kong all have a clear picture in mind. For the wise Hong Kong people, if RTHK has become a spokesman for the government, will they listen to or watch our programmes any longer? Will it be a waste of public money if a broadcaster operated by public money does not have any audience at all?

Corporatisation of RTHK

It is recently suggested that RTHK should be corporatised. As staff of RTHK, we are willing to consider it if corporatisation can enable us to serve the public effectively without bearing unnecessary interference. But the prerequisite is, charters should be laid down to ensure the continuity of editorial independence, set out the management framework, oversee the transition of existing staff members, stabilise financial arrangements, etc. These are all core questions. As long as there is no concrete policy of it, corporatisation or privatisation is only empty talk.

Present difficulties

RTHK staff pride themselves on the production of high quality programmes for the public. Although the government has greatly cut provisions in the past few years and that we are constantly under fire from all sides, we still labour without uttering a word and demonstrate our professionalism. Over the years, we have won many local and overseas media awards.

But it's hard to work without tools. RTHK has talented staff members but its hardware, like offices and equipments, is very outdated. It adds difficulty to our work. For example, offices in the Broadcasting House and the ETV Centre are so old and in poor shapes that water seepage was found last month when rain kept falling for a whole month.

These buildings were constructed in the 1960's to 1970's. Original infrastructures, like electricity supply, cannot meet the nowadays standards. On average, three officers have to

share one computer. They have to queue to use the computer for information research, word processing, script writing, etc. They joke that when using the computer, a person should not answer phone calls because once unattended, the computer will be taken over by another officer. As with the poor shape of office buildings and decentralization of office locations, we take the view that the construction of a new complex can solve the problems in the long run. Unfortunately, the reprovisioning project has been downgraded from Category B to Category C. It seems that RTHK's newly-designed production cum office complex will be held for an indefinite period.

Old equipment also poses many constraints to us. Due to the reduction in provisions by the government, we are not able to purchase or renew equipments. It is best reflected in Film Services' outside broadcast vehicle, being the one and only one in the Public Affairs Television Division and having a history of 12 years. All equipment on the vehicle has exceeded the valid maintenance period and some have even ceased production. How long can this vehicle still be in operation? Besides shooting programmes, the vehicle is also used to relay some large-scale events such as the 1st July Handover Ceremony, flag-raising ceremony, etc. By this year end when the WTO Ministerial Conferences are held, this vehicle will be in use again. If it breaks down in the middle of the relay, will it be a loss to the audience?

We are most frustrated by the impending digital audio broadcasting because we are still not allocated provisions for research and development. In this case, how can we implement the terrestrial TV digital broadcasting in 2007? As a public broadcaster, when we cannot carry out fundamental technical developments, how can we correspond to future digital developments?

Conclusion

Confronted with the keeping and not keeping of RTHK programmes recently, staff members are suffering great pressure. Nevertheless, we still try to do the best and uphold our performance pledges to inform, educate and entertain the public. Hope you councillors will continue to support us. Thank you!