

# **Carrying through Public Service Broadcasting, Providing Quality Programming and Promoting Cultural Development**

## **The Position Paper of School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong on Public Service Broadcasting Review in Hong Kong**

The public service broadcasting that we used to know is an unusual outcome of the historical development of Hong Kong. Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) was a mouthpiece of the colonial government before the 1970s. It gradually secured editorial independence through special programming strategies that could satisfy the peculiar needs of Hong Kong's social development during the 1970s and 1980s. RTHK finally evolved into its current state by partially playing the role of a public broadcaster and being a government department at the same time.

The development of public service broadcasting in Hong Kong was not complete in the past decades. RTHK played an important role in strengthening the communication between the ruler and the ruled, providing objective and fair information service and opinion, and establishing new cultural trends. Now, Hong Kong is entering into a new age with profound changes taking place. These changes inevitably create new challenges to individuals, organizations and the whole community.

### **Meeting the Needs of Future Development in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong has returned to China's sovereignty for almost 10 years. During this period of time, political and economic integration between the mainland and Hong Kong has accelerated. In line with this, Hong Kong needs to re-position herself to face new challenges such as economic re-structuring and increasing demand for political participation that are results of the increasing maturity of the civil society. The previous colonial mentality of "borrowed time and borrowed place" can no longer be the background of the review on public service broadcasting. Instead, we must take the position that "Hong Kong is our family" to actively consider Hong Kong's long-term development.

Side by side with these domestic developments are the advancement of information technologies and the challenges of globalization. Developing at a tremendous pace, information technologies have significant impact on the restructuring and cause-and-effect relationship of the world and society. The forces of information technologies and globalization change the media ecology and while also providing new spaces for further development of existing media. The commercial and public media have to reposition themselves and move in new directions as the traditional boundaries become increasingly blurred.

We believe that the focus of the present review must transcend personal interest as well as political preference of individual groups. The starting point of this review

should not only aim at solving an historical problem but also clarify the broadcasting philosophy of Hong Kong, fulfill citizens' information and entertainment needs, and attain the goal of developing civic culture.

### **Basic Values of Public Service Broadcasting**

Public service broadcasting has a long history of development in many European countries. Its contribution in promoting cultural development and promoting the overall progress of the broadcasting industry in many nations can rival and even surpass its commercial counterparts. Broadening citizens' horizon, promoting debate on public affairs, enhancing social integration and elevating cultural taste are some of the distinctive features of public service broadcasting. Competing for profit is not the primary goal of a public broadcaster. Instead, its core values are to provide diversified programs, modulate and supplement the inadequacies of, and even compete with, commercial broadcasters in the broadcasting market.

Generating profit is the major target of commercial operators. Excessive pursuit of profits may result in the ignoring of "high culture" programs as well as downplaying topics which are of high concern to small and neglected social groups. To meet market demand, commercial media content tends to be entertaining in nature. As a metropolis of multi-national cultures, Hong Kong should have pluralistic broadcasting programs. But some commercial media content may not have enough cultural value and horizon; their programming cannot fully satisfy the needs of Hong Kong as an international metropolis.

Due to the relative absence of the market influence, public service broadcasting can supplement the inadequacies of the commercial culture, elevate citizens' cultural taste, improve program quality, provide alternative choices, and promote a healthy broadcasting market. To say that the existence of the public broadcaster is a form of market intervention, or to say that it should not compete with commercial broadcasters at all is a misunderstanding of public service broadcasting. It should not only provide alternative or niche programs but should also produce diversified programs to satisfy the needs of the general public. In particular, public service broadcasting should provide objective, fair and reliable information service, and serve as an open platform for free discussion with width and depth among the citizens. Public broadcasters can compete with commercial service providers in a positive way, and the program types can overlap to a certain extent. This could enhance the market, promote creativity and provide quality production, making the media market more diversified and offering more good choices to the citizens.

There is some difference between the broadcast media and the print media. The former can reach a broader audience from all walks of life and with larger impact. Commercial broadcasting delivers more entertainment programs supplemented with information programs, whereas public service broadcasting concentrates more on producing informational and educational programs supplemented with entertaining genres. They have different roles and yet are complementary to each other. As public service broadcasting exists in almost all developed societies, public service broadcasting can be regarded as an excellent tradition and presence in human broadcasting history.

## Voice of the Public

Public service broadcasting mainly relies on public funding and its success or failure directly affects the Hong Kong people. Thus, the public's view cannot be overlooked in this reviewing exercise. We need to know the public's view about the performance, role, functions, mode of operation and resource allocation of Hong Kong's only public service broadcasting provider (RTHK) in order to gauge the general public's thinking on public service broadcasting. In light of this, the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong administered a community-wide scientific telephone poll from 24 to 28 February, 2006. Using a random sampling method, a total of 1,044 citizens aged 18 or above were successfully interviewed. The response rate is 56% and the error margin is +/-3%. There are five questions in the survey related to RTHK and public service broadcasting. Detailed results are available in Table 1.

The survey finds that more than half of the respondents were satisfied with the overall performance of RTHK. About 40% of them rated it "so so" and less than 4% found it dissatisfactory. RTHK should have room for improvement but its performance on the whole is positively recognized by the majority of citizens. Concerning the role of RTHK, 80% of the respondents felt that RTHK should bear the responsibility of monitoring the government and criticizing its policies; this shows that citizens strongly support an independent editorial policy for the public broadcaster. This is in stark contrast to an alternate view that RTHK should be turned into a government mouthpiece.

Some people think that public service broadcasting is a form of intervention towards the commercial market. Other people have the view that the existence of RTHK can supplement the inadequacies of the commercial market. The survey finds that the majority of respondents thought that RTHK does not affect the market at all. Nearly 30% of them held the supplementary view while less than 10% agreed to the market intervention hypothesis. The data show that citizens did not find that the existence of a public broadcaster would distort the broadcasting market. On the contrary, a sizable proportion of them thought that a public broadcaster can play a supplementary role to the market.

Do citizens think that RTHK should be separated from the government and operated as a public body? A majority of respondents (57%) gave a positive answer while less than 40% said otherwise. This result is in line with the citizens' support of RTHK's editorial independence. In terms of resources, close to 60% of respondents said RTHK's funding should remain unchanged if it maintains the role of a public broadcaster. Another 37% said there should be an increase in funding to RTHK while only 5% thought that funding should be cut. It is worth noting that the survey elicited the respondents' assessment of RTHK's current situation. We believe that if public service broadcasting is fully realized, citizens' support for allocating more resources to this service would be increased. It is clear that Hong Kong citizens do not want to trim the budget of RTHK further.

In conclusion, this survey shows that the general public acknowledges RTHK's contribution to the community and strongly supports RTHK's editorial independence and separation from the government. They also generally agree that public service

broadcasting has a supplementary role to play in the broadcasting market, and extra resources should be given to facilitate full development of the public broadcaster.

## **Challenges and Suggestions**

Public service broadcasting plays an important role in providing alternative and diversified programming, strengthening social consciousness, elevating Hong Kong culture, and enhancing the taste of the media market. But the existing public broadcaster is unable to optimize its performance due to historical factors and practical constraints. At present, RTHK plays a public broadcasting role but remains a government department. Such an embarrassing mismatch not only contravenes the fundamental values of public service broadcasting but also affects the efficiency of RTHK, thus limiting the full development of public service broadcasting.

We think that the government has to change its relationship with RTHK and let RTHK become independent. With a statutory status, RTHK can increase its autonomy and become a real public service broadcasting system free of government and commercial pressure. RTHK should use public interest as its guiding light, emphasize program quality and originality. Its staff should be recruited on non-civil servant terms with proper accountability mechanisms to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness.

To strengthen the current public broadcasting service, the SAR government must provide dedicated channels and adequate financial resources. The public broadcaster's statutory status should spell out a high degree of editorial and financial autonomy so that it can freely decide on its programming strategies, production modes and transmission arrangements.

The public broadcaster must be accountable to the people who pay for it. There are various forms of public service broadcasting. However, some basic principles cannot be violated. First, the top management committee or the board of governors of that public broadcaster must be independent from the government. Second, the authority of the members of the management committee must be based on wide public support. This committee should receive the endorsement of, or recognition by, the legislative and executive branches of the government in order to have legitimacy. This committee is only responsible for deciding on major policies, programming strategies and resource allocation. The personnel of the public broadcaster should have operational autonomy.

Hong Kong is among the lowest in public service broadcasting expenditure when compared to other developed societies. The government should increase the resources for public service broadcasting to strengthen it and make sure it can exert desirable impact in the market-dominated media environment. In view of a globalized economic environment and the fast development in the Chinese market, local broadcast media can directly appeal to the overseas Chinese communities and also have opportunities to enter into the vast cultural market in mainland China. Some important functions of public service broadcasting include: producing quality cultural programs with Hong Kong characteristics and using them to promote Hong Kong to various groups of people outside Hong Kong, helping build local identity inside Hong Kong, and promoting interflow between Hong Kong and the mainland. At the same time, public service broadcasting is an integral part of the creative industry, which has

become the much sought after goal of many countries. Hong Kong should seize the opportunity to put greater effort to develop creative and high-quality public broadcasting program content.

Digitization of media technologies brings along a proliferation of program channels, which should have sufficient channel resources for both commercial and public services to provide a variety of programs. The government can even consider opening up some channels for the general public and individual small organizations as well. There should be no conflict between the public channels and public service broadcasting as they have their own functions. Some local art and cultural organizations have requested a public channel to air their programs. With abundant channels available after digitization of the broadcasting network, the government could seriously consider and fulfill these needs in distributing channel resources. However, it should not treat public channels and public service broadcasting as the same thing.

In an age of multi-channel narrowcasting, different groups in society need to talk to one another in order to facilitate communication and discuss major social issues. Public service broadcasting can provide a platform to generate public opinion, as well as to let the public speak among themselves and to the government. This would be conducive to the government's effort of establishing a "harmonious society" and practicing "strong leadership." In this regard, Hong Kong needs a stronger public service broadcasting to build up such a public sphere now more than ever.

## **Conclusion**

We think that the review of public service broadcasting should take into consideration the long term development needs of Hong Kong, and fully understand the social functions and role of public service broadcasting. After careful consideration and discussion, and noting the views of the Hong Kong citizens, we wish to summarize our ideas and suggestions as follows:

### I. Rationale of public service broadcasting

- Striving for excellence and creativity, providing quality programs and real choices for the citizens, promoting the development of Hong Kong culture, catering to the diverse needs of the community and providing programs for minority populations.
- Grounding in public interest, providing a fair and open platform to facilitate democratic public discussion, constructing a comprehensive view and seeking consensus.
- Allowing public service broadcasting to be free from political power and commercial interest in terms of organizational, resource and personnel matters.

### II. Financial resources and allocation

- Stable and adequate financial provisions should mainly come from public money, supplemented with private donations and sponsorship.
- The government should provide sufficient channels and financial resources to fully implement a bona fide public service broadcasting system.

### III. Management structure and mechanism

- The management committee/board of governors should be independent from the government.
- The power of the management committee should come from wide bases of public support and representation. It has to be endorsed or recognized by the legislative and the executive branches of the government.
- The management committee only takes care of major policy issues, programming strategies and resource allocation. The personnel of the public broadcaster should have operational autonomy.

[Note: This is the English translation of the original position paper, which was first written in Chinese.]

## Appendix

**Table 1: Citizens' Views on RTHK**

Question	Response (%)			Total (%) (N)
1. Overall, what do you think of RTHK's performance?	Quite Bad/Very Bad	So So	Quite Good/Very Good	100 (960)
	3.5	41.4	55.1	
2. Do you think RTHK should or should not monitor the government and criticize government's policies?	Should	It depends	Should Not	100 (966)
	80.5	6.7	12.9	
3. Do you think RTHK's broadcast services have any impact on the commercial broadcast market? Does RTHK interfere with the broadcast market, supplement the market or has no influence at all?	Interfere Market	No Influence	Supplement Market	100 (895)
	7.6	63.6	28.8	
4. Do you think RTHK should or should not change its status as a government department and become a public body? That is, it shall be governed by a non-government management committee?	Should	It depends	Should Not	100 (906)
	56.7	5.2	38.1	
5. If RTHK maintains its public service broadcasting role, do you think the government should provide RTHK with more resources, reduce its resources, or give the same amount?	Increase Resources	Remain the Same	Reduce Resources	100 (931)
	37.4	57.8	4.7	

Note: The above percentages are based on those who expressed views. Those without an opinion or refused to answer together had a share of 8-14% of the total sample.