

Review of Public Service Broadcasting

Synopsis of Consultation with Broadcasters and Academics

Since late February 2006, the Committee has held separate consultation sessions with RTHK and its staff union, five commercial broadcasters, Citizens' Radio and academics from local tertiary institutions offering communication and journalism-related courses. The objective was to receive views, comments and suggestions on the development of public service broadcasting (PSB) in Hong Kong. The Committee has undertaken to receive all views in confidence, and use them for the exclusive purpose of the review. This note highlights the key issues discussed during these consultation session, and summarises the views received on a non-attributed basis.

1. Purposes, Values and Need for PSB

There is *consensus* on the need for and value of PSB in Hong Kong. Broadly speaking, everyone believes that PSB should serve the following purposes -

- (1) Preserves and contributes to pluralism in opinion and creative expression.
- (2) Promotes originality and good taste through quality PSB programming.
- (3) Caters for the entire community, including (and especially for) minority interests, through comprehensive programming.
- (4) Complements and supplements commercial programming.

2. Guiding Principles for PSB

In addition to the PSB missions set out above, there is also *consensus* that PSB should –

- (1) Serve the public interest as a public trust, by upholding the principles of a free and responsible media.
- (2) Be editorially independent, and not subject to political, government and/or commercial influences.
- (3) Comply with professional standards of accuracy, fairness and impartiality.
- (4) Be accountable to the general public in terms of programming, as well as financial prudence and propriety.

3. Roles of Public vs Commercial Broadcasters

- 3.1 There is *consensus* over the lack of a clear PSB policy at present. The *majority* considers that the review provides an opportunity to establish the policy and clarify the respective roles of public and commercial broadcasters. There is a *minority* view that the purpose of the review is to “fix” Radio Television Hong Kong. Those who hold this view urge the Committee to be guided by public expectations instead of the “political agenda”.
- 3.2 There is *general recognition* that, at present, both publicly funded and commercial broadcasters provide PSB programmes. The *commercial broadcasters* submit that they have in fact done so way beyond their licensing obligations in terms of output hours, especially in television.
- 3.3 The *commercial broadcasters* in general accept competition with a public broadcaster in programme quality, but are concerned about what they perceive as current overlap in programming.
- 3.4 *Other interviewees* believe that a public broadcaster should maintain a full range of programmes to achieve social impact. For so long as its programming policy is driven by the public interest, the role of a public broadcaster should not be restricted to, or defined by, what is left unserved by the commercial broadcasters. They have a strong and clearly stated expectation that a public broadcaster should foster social justice and equality, and provide an open platform for all to air their views.

4. **PSB Funding**

- 4.1 The *majority* believes that the funding of a public broadcaster should come - either exclusively or substantially - from the public purse. This will underline the public service nature of PSB, and clearly charge it with the responsibility for promoting public interest. It is also a *majority* view that license fee is a good choice in theory, but hardly feasible in Hong Kong because of its small market size (of only about two million TV households).
- 4.2 The *majority* believes that reliance on public funding will immune a public broadcaster from commercial pressures. The extent to which a public broadcaster will be shielded from political and/or government influence will depend on the exact funding model.
- 4.3 *Some* believe that PSB funding should be allocated on a triennium or five-year cycle to allow forward planning.
- 4.4 There are *divergent views* on alternative sources of PSB funding.
- (1) The *consensus* is that a public broadcaster should not raise advertising revenue, as it will threaten the viability of commercial broadcasting, and render a public broadcaster vulnerable to commercial pressure.
 - (2) The *commercial broadcasters* are adamantly opposed to commercial sponsorship, but find institutional sponsorship from non-governmental organizations acceptable.
 - (3) Other suggestions include donations, sales of programmes, and lease of equipment or provision of advisory services to community broadcasters and independent producers.
 - (4) *Some* have suggested that a public broadcaster be publicly funded initially, but be required to explore alternative sources so that it may eventually secure a given percentage of its expenditure from such alternative sources.
- 4.5 No concrete proposal has been put forward on the funding model. There is a *general realization* that no perfect model exists, and

Hong Kong needs to develop its own funding solution and drive for community consensus.

5. Status and Governance of a Public Broadcaster

- 5.1 There is *consensus* that a public broadcaster should be outside of the government structure and staffed by non-civil servants. *Many* believe that the independent status of a public broadcaster should be enshrined in law.
- 5.2 There is also *consensus* that a public broadcaster should be managed and supervised by an independent board. However, there are *divergent views* on how the board members should be appointed.
- 5.3 Those who have discussed the details consider that the governing board of a public broadcaster should focus on the entity's overall direction, effectiveness and financial soundness, but should not be involved in day-to-day operation.

6. Accountability of a Public Broadcaster

- 6.1 The *consensus* is that a public broadcaster must be accountable to the public for its programming policy, output quality, and financial prudence and propriety.
- 6.2 *Some* have put forward suggestions on accountability measures. These include,
- (a) On general accountability –
 - (1) Release of annual report.
 - (2) Public assessment (details undefined).
 - (b) On financial accountability –
 - (1) Sound internal auditing mechanism.
 - (2) External financial audit.
 - (3) Review by the Audit Commission.

(4) Oversight by the Legislative Council.

7. Other Issues Discussed

Regulatory Regime

7.1 The *majority* believes that once a public broadcaster is removed from the government setup, it should be brought under the same regulatory regime as commercial broadcaster, and be liable to the same consequences for breach of applicable laws and regulations.

Digital Broadcast

7.2 The development of digital broadcast is a heatedly discussed topic. The *majority* believes that in future, spectrum scarcity will no longer pose any constraint on broadcasting. *Some* suggest that digital broadcast will free up existing spectrum to make room for community access channels.

Platform for Promoting Government Policies

7.3 The majority recognizes that the Government has a legitimate need for a platform to explain and promote its policies. However, this role should not be imposed on a public broadcaster.

ENDS