

**Position paper on Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong:
A submission to the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting, Legislative
Council, by the School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University**

Nature and goals of public service broadcasting

To talk about public service broadcasting, we need first to define its nature. Central to the concept of PSB is the idea of ‘the public’, which stated simply, is the collective of citizens formed through broadcasting communication. It is the public, as a collective, that is the ultimate benefactor of PSB. The mission of PSB could be said to build, maintain and develop the public as a collective. But who are the people who constitute the public? In this age, the people in a geographical territory always include non-citizens of the territory. We believe it is important that PSB serves the non-citizens as well.

The mission of the PSB is a cultural one in the broad sense that is central to the well being of society. Based on this, we do not see PSB as a service in the marketplace. We therefore object to the perspective put forth by the government in the Legislative Council brief about the present review, one that positions PSB as a form of market intervention. We caution that if PSB is defined as a service, it will be open to the pressure of market liberalization being promoted and legitimated in international agreements on trade and services.

We think that in the Hong Kong context, the PSB mission could be expressed as the following goals, which connect the individuals to the collective:

- To inform, and to support fair debate of public matters
- To educate, and to facilitate responsible participation in public matters
- To entertain, and to enhance tolerant understanding of the cultures and values inside and outside the territory

Universal access and quality programming are conditions needed to achieve these goals.

PSB as a system

The goals of PSB can be best attained by establishing a system that is stable and accountable ultimately to the public. The main component of this system needs to be a public broadcasting organization, responsible for providing the majority of the programmes.

Independent programme providers and even commercial broadcasters could play a part in the PSB system through contractual arrangements administered by the public broadcaster. Programmes supplied by commercial broadcasters by contracts are to be separate from the programmes they now produce and broadcast under the public service requirements of their broadcasting licences. Given the reality that RTHK, the de facto public broadcaster, provides only a limited range of programmes partly because it does not have its own transmission channels, the public service requirements on the commercial broadcasters should continue to remain for the time being. At a later time, these requirements could be reviewed in an exercise that involves the future public broadcaster and the public in general.

PSB as comprehensive programming

The goals we state above are grounded on our belief that PSB consists of a comprehensive range of quality programmes. PSB is not a supplement but an alternative to commercial broadcasting. PSB should not be restricted to only some special types of programmes or non-profitable programmes.

Some suggest that there is no longer the need for PSB to provide comprehensive programming because multiple channels are available on cable and satellite television, and the

Internet. Quite the opposite. PSB comprehensive programming has become more, not less, needed. The majority of the new media content is produced by international broadcasters, which have no concern for building, maintaining and developing the public in Hong Kong. This broadcast content cannot be a substitute of PSB. In addition, the new media content is designed to target particular audience profiles. While it bears the potential in creating transnational communities of interest, it segments the people in one geographical territory, and runs contrary to the idea of PSB in building a public in a particular territory. The fact that most of this content is in English also excludes a significant portion of the population.

Further, the new media content, which the government claims is easily accessible, in fact is far from universally accessed. For example, Hong Kong i-Cable television, after years of its operation, has secured subscription of less than one-third of households. The percentage of households having PCs connected to the Internet has not increased since 2004. More than one-third of households remain un-connected.

Orientation and financing

For PSB to focus on its mission, it needs to be provided with a stable source of revenue that does not depend on the size of the audience it captures. We think that the majority of its revenue needs to be public money. To minimize political influence over its operation, the revenue system in which a certain percentage of tax income goes automatically to the public broadcaster could be considered. It also has the advantage of progressive contribution according to income.

To supplement the public source of revenue, donation and sponsorships could be allowed, if a mechanism is established to ensure that no constraints are put on the production and content of the programmes sponsored. Programme sale is another acceptable source of revenue.

Advertising seeks to turn the individual into a consumer, and competes with PBS's effort to develop the individual's capacity as citizen. Enough examples overseas have shown that allowing advertising threatens to divert the public broadcaster away from its mission.

Institutional setup

We acknowledge that in the recent decades, RTHK has served well some of the PSB goals in its education, children, elderly, minorities, and news and public affairs programming, although improvements could be made on many fronts. The future public broadcaster could be built beneficially on the foundation laid and the experience gained by RTHK.

Governance

For the public broadcaster to act independently of political interest, it is essential that it is formed as a body separate from the political institutions. The present arrangement where RTHK is a government department is unsatisfactory. Establishing the public broadcaster as a statutory body is an option. The overseeing role played by the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau on RTHK would need to be taken up by another overseeing body.

To help ensure that the public broadcaster serves the public, we recommend that the overseeing body be constituted of two categories of members. One category would be members returned by some form of election. Another category would be members appointed by the Chief Executive in Council and endorsed by the Legislative Council who can represent the diversity in society and include experts knowledgeable on the media. This combination of membership would give the body the needed representation, legitimacy and expertise.

A mechanism could be built in for periodic reviews of the direction and remit of public broadcasting. The period could take reference from the licence period of 12 years for commercial broadcasters. Within the 12-year period, interim performance reviews should be conducted. The broadcasting codes of practices with the monitoring mechanism now applicable to commercial broadcasters could also be applied to the public broadcaster.

Extension of PSB

Now that video production is cheap and easy to master, the citizens themselves are capable of producing broadcast programmes. These programmes could build the public by giving expression to diversity and providing alternatives. We think that a fund for citizen and independent productions should be established to encourage their productions. Public access channels should be provided to broadcast their programmes.

Conclusion

We welcome the government review on public service broadcasting as an opportunity to establish a system that can carry out the PSB mission better and more effectively.

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