

Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Synopsis of major views and concerns on “public service broadcasting” raised at the special meeting held on 1 August 2006

Issues	Views/concerns
Public service mandate	<p>Public service broadcasting (PSB) plays an important part in developing citizens’ knowledge, broadening their horizons and enabling them to better understand themselves, others and the world. The Government should take a proactive role in developing PSB so as to build a pluralistic, inclusive, liberal and open civil society.</p> <p>A public service broadcaster should be accountable to the public and be able to operate with institutional independence, flexibility and sustainability. A distinction should be drawn between public service broadcasters and state broadcasters. The former should produce programmes to meet the public service needs of broadcasting while the latter is more often mandated to promote government policies and information.</p> <p>Some deputations consider that in general, RTHK has been able to fulfil the role of a public service broadcaster.</p>
Commercial broadcasters’ role in delivering PSB	<p>There is a view that commercial broadcasting licensees should continue to provide PSB programmes, in particular news and current affairs programmes, given that frequency spectrum for broadcasting is a scarce public asset and should not be utilized solely for deriving commercial gains.</p> <p>There is a suggestion that even if the future public service broadcaster is assigned its own television channel, transitional arrangement should be made for commercial broadcasters to continue to carry PSB programmes during the initial operation of the public service broadcaster in order that the latter can establish its position in the market and build up its audienceship.</p>

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PSB provider	<p>The Professor from HKBU opines that given Hong Kong's relatively small market, a single major PSB provider should be adequate and efficient. In addition, the Government should also consider assisting local universities that offer broadcasting degree programmes to set up their own PSB stations with a view to nurturing a critical mass of broadcasting professionals.</p>
Funding	<p>There is general agreement that the public service broadcaster should be publicly-funded. The source of funding should be stable and the funding level should be adequate. While maintaining an open attitude on the PSB funding model, RTHK is in favour of a hybrid model in which 80-85% of the funding is derived from direct government subsidy appropriated on a 3 or 5-year basis and the remaining funding made up by sponsorships, donations and revenue generated from programme sales and commercial sources. Other funding alternatives proposed by some deputations include appropriation from the Government's income from tax, rates and licence fees collected while others have stated their reservation on these alternative options.</p> <p>On the feasibility of allowing public service broadcasters to accept commercial sponsorships without posing direct competition to commercial broadcasters, RTHK suggests that a set of guidelines should be developed on the permissible sponsorship announcements that a public service broadcaster can broadcast, as in the case of some overseas public service broadcasters. Commercial sponsorships may also be allowed for certain programmes not provided by commercial broadcasters. The Professor from HKBU further suggests that the amount of such sponsorship, if allowed, should not exceed 15% of the total operational cost of the public service broadcaster.</p>

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Institutional arrangement	<p>There is general agreement that the public service broadcaster should be a statutory body. The public service broadcaster should also be subject to regulation by the Broadcasting Authority under a licensing regime.</p> <p>Members and deputations share the view that RTHK's current status as a government department is not conducive to its performing the role of a public service broadcaster.</p>
Editorial independence	<p>There is general agreement that the public service broadcaster should be able to operate with editorial independence and free from political and commercial influences. Even if limited commercial sponsorship is allowed, this must not compromise the editorial independence of the public service broadcaster. Editorial independence should be enshrined in the governing legislation of the public service broadcaster.</p>
Governance	<p>To ensure effective governance and accountability, there is general agreement that the public service broadcaster should be governed by a governing board independent of the Government and its chief executive officer (CEO) should serve as the chief editor.</p> <p>RTHK further suggests that the public service broadcaster should take part in the selection of its CEO and the appointment of senior staff.</p> <p>On the composition of the governing board, RTHK suggests that it should comprise 10 to 20 unofficial members drawn from relevant sectors such as broadcasting, education, arts, culture, technology, journalism, law, etc. They should be elected or openly nominated by community organizations from the relevant sectors and Legislative Council (LegCo) should play a role in the nomination procedure. The RTHK Programme Staff Union considers that the membership of the governing board should not be less than 20 and one of the members should be RTHK staff.</p>

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	<p>To enhance accountability, there is also a suggestion that LegCo should be empowered to appoint or remove members of the boards or the CEO. The Citizens' Radio, however, does not support the suggestion for reason that not all LegCo Members are returned by direct elections and hence, cannot fully represent the interest of the general public. Some deputations suggest that a majority of members of the governing board should be elected by the public through one-man one-vote.</p>
Community/public access channels	<p>Members and a number of deputations support the establishment of public access channels, which will provide an open platform for the public to voice their views, and promote the development of democracy in Hong Kong. The Government is urged to open up frequency spectrum for public access channels and to devise a streamlined licensing regime so that interested parties can apply without difficulty to operate these channels.</p>
Carriage platform	<p>RTHK urges that it should be allocated its own independent television channel and be given adequate funding for programme production. In principle, members and deputations support RTHK's aspiration.</p>
Digitalization	<p>RTHK aspires to develop digitalization of broadcasting in radio and high-definition television, to reinforce its multimedia services and to relocate to a new broadcasting house. HKHRM considers that financial assistance should be provided by the Government to help RTHK migrate to digitalized services.</p>
Staff concerns	<p>RTHK and its programme staff union stress the importance of staff consultation in the review of PSB, in particular the arrangements, if any, for corporatization of RTHK.</p> <p>The Union does not subscribe to the view that existing civil service staff of RTHK must give up their civil</p>

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	<p>servant status if RTHK is corporatized. On the contrary, the job security of the civil service would enable RTHK staff to carry out their public duties in a professional and committed manner without the fear of losing their jobs easily.</p>
<p>Public consultation and participation in the review of PSB</p>	<p>Some deputations and members share the view that unlike other places, there has been little informed public discussion on PSB in Hong Kong. To engender greater public awareness, the Government is urged to make available more information on the needs for and core values of PSB in a civil society. They also agree with a member's suggestion that having regard to the recommendations of the Review Committee, the Government should publish a consultation paper setting out the background with relevant information, such as overseas PSB models, and putting forward some policy options on how PSB should be developed in Hong Kong. As such, the community can focus their discussion on pertinent issues, such as governance, funding method and public service remit of PSB etc. There is also a suggestion that apart from setting up a discussion zone on its website, RTHK should consider producing a programme to serve as a platform for the public to voice their views on PSB.</p> <p>There is a suggestion that if the Review Committee needs more time to complete the review of PSB, it should consider the feasibility of issuing an interim report on its findings and observations. This would encourage more focused public discussion to take place.</p>

Abbreviations :

- RTHK : Radio Television Hong Kong
 HKBU : Hong Kong Baptist University
 HKHRM : Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor
 Review Committee : Committee on Review of Public Service Broadcasting
 The Union : The RTHK Programme Staff Union