

To Legco Information and Technology Panel:

Submission by RTHK Programme Staff Union on editorial independence of RTHK and related matters.

(Submission date: 19/6/2013)

1. Introduction

As the only public service broadcaster in Hong Kong, safeguarding our editorial independence has always been an uphill battle. Over the years, the RTHK Programme Staff Union has been opposing the appointment of an Administrative Officer, with no broadcasting experience, to head the station.

This has led to a number of concerns, including the lack of consideration for our professionalism and undermining of our editorial independence.

Two years ago when Roy Tang took up the post, our staff rolled out a black carpet at Broadcasting House to welcome him – this was indicative that the station was entering dark times. We were very concerned and very anxious about the future of RTHK and we feared that under the leadership of an Administrative Officer, the station would be turned into a propaganda machine which would undermine our mission as a public service broadcaster: to uphold Hong Kong's freedom of speech and to monitor the government. Unfortunately, our worries had turned into reality. Since last year, several illogical and unprofessional decisions made by the Director of Broadcasting prompted questions whether Mr. Tang was carrying out any political missions.

2. Allegations over DB interference into editorial independence and tread on professionalism

2.1 The “Empty Chair” incident

On 2nd September 2012, the program of “City Forum” was set to discuss the introduction of National Education into local schools. RTHK invited both Eddie Ng, Secretary of Education and Anna Wu, Chairman, Committee on the Implementation of Moral and National Education and they both declined to appear on the programme.

This was a topic of concern amongst Hong Kong citizens, with negative sentiments soaring in society, namely the students and various supporters amongst the public began their hunger strike, and officials had a duty to face the

public. We need to emphasize that the “City Forum” team had repeatedly invited officials on the programme but they declined all invitations. In light of this, the producers decided to place an empty chair during the programme to indicate that the officials had been invited and with the hope they would still want to join them. However, it was understood that this arrangement had upset the management. Mr. Tang was concerned whether the intention of the empty chair was placed to embarrass the missing officials.

As a media organization, we should not be fearful of anyone – regardless of whether they are wealthy or powerful. Our reporting should not be based on whether officials *might* feel embarrassed, but should be based on public interest. When making the decision to place an empty chair, the producer took into consideration the latest situation as well as public sentiments. The intention was NOT to embarrass the official, but to let the public know that we had really tried to set up a balanced programme and we were offering the chance for the government and all sides to put their side of the story across.

The Director of Broadcasting, Roy Tang’s limited media principles were reflected in his handling of this incident. He continuously defended the government as an Administrative Officer, rather than looking at this objectively as a Director of Broadcasting. Following this, the Director of Broadcasting sought to amend internal guidelines on placing empty chair, and suggested that any future ‘uses’ of the empty chair would need the approval of an Assistant Director, instead of the current required approval of the section head.

What Mr. Tang was trying to do was to overturn an effective established working mechanism used in the past few decades. As a result this had drawn strong opposition from our frontline workers and the Union was deeply concerned about this.

After the incident, the production team tried on several occasions to explain their scenarios, but the Director for Broadcasting rejected it, and this led to a serious breakdown of communication. Mr. Tang criticized frontline staff in a Legco panel meeting on March 11, saying the staff’s explanation was contradictory. Without properly explaining the full story, his criticisms were unfair to the production team, and reflected his lack of journalistic experience by forcing his Administrative Officer mindset on our professionalism.

2.2 Proposal to move our flagship programmes to ATV

Despite that the Director of Broadcasting repeatedly denied reports regarding moving “Headliners” and “HK Connection” to ATV for broadcasting permanently, yet during a meeting with staff on March 15, when asked about whether he had requested to shunt the two programmes to ATV permanently outside the production meeting, Mr Tang said he had “never denied this”. Staff was shocked to hear his response, and felt that it was a “mindless” move to kick two flagship

programmes to a TV station that has long had a low audience rating. One must question if the decision involved any political motivation.

2.3 Cancelling “Legco Review”

Shortly after the new Legco session began last November, Mr. Tang abruptly proposed to scrap a flagship TV programme “Legco Review,” a programme with 26 years of history.

It is the only TV programme in Hong Kong that focuses on Legco news and hot political topics. Our usual practice for arrangements regarding TV programmes’ for the coming year is done in September or October. The timing of Mr. Tang’s proposal, coupled with his unconvincing explanations, is highly suspicious.

Hong Kong’s constitutional development is at a critical juncture, and the community needs this kind of programme to offer analysis and a diverse spectrum of viewpoints. However, Mr. Tang’s thinking deviated from this.

Mr. Tang felt the content of a few TV programmes such as “Legco Review”, “Headliner”, “City Forum” and “Pentaprism” were repetitive. Mr. Tang also pointed out that RTHK’s own digital TV channel was already broadcasting live Legco meetings and there were similar programmes on other TV stations, therefore there was no need that “Legco Review” should carry on. His thinking was difficult for staff to understand.

In addition, live broadcasting Legco meetings is very different from current affairs programmes. Citing these reasons to scrap “Legco Review” showed Mr. Tang’s lack of understanding of the differences among these programmes and also reflected his lack of professional knowledge. Questions were also raised among staff if his proposal was politically motivated, to suppress voices from the legislature.

2.4 Disregarding programme’s quality by increasing trial TV production time

According to an arrangement, RTHK was supposed to broadcast eight hours of TV programmes on its first digital TV channel in 2013. But at the end of last year, the Director for Broadcasting overturned the arrangement, requesting staff to subsequently increase the broadcast time to 16 hours. Due to a lack of resources and manpower, Mr. Tang proposed a low-cost idea to run a certain number of radio programmes on the Digital TV station, by placing cameras in radio studios.

Without undergoing any consultation with staff, this immediately sparked worry and concerns among staff as we strongly opposed this kind of *quantity-based* approach. When the public has a high expectation of our public service broadcasting, and other TV stations have a competitive edge in their equipments and resources this so called Radio-TV approach prompted questions over Mr. Tang's vision on the development of RTHK and its TV programmes' quality. Some staff members from the Radio Division also pointed out the operation of radio is very different from TV, with guests often participating in programmes over the phone, by copying the mode to TV would seriously undermine our programmes' quality, and could also lower the public confidence in our programmes' credibility and reputation.

In an internal staff session with the management, the Director of Broadcasting had stressed several times that the station should maximize its resources to produce as many programmes as possible. But many departments criticised the move would seriously affect the programmes' quality. It is also difficult for staff to understand why Mr. Tang was ignoring fundamental problems such as lack of resources, time and manpower. In addition, this had never been thoroughly discussed, which further undermined our professionalism. Mr. Tang proposal was shelved in the end, but the incident had made colleagues question Mr. Tang's vision and motive.

2.5 Demanding a chronology report from "Headliners"

The production team of "Headliners" briefed the management about its new ideas of the programme in March, including using Adolf Hitler as a character. During the meeting, the management expressed no strong opposition, nor was there a detailed discussion. Yet the Director of Broadcasting later expressed his concerns in an email. Staff from different ranks understood Mr. Tang's concerns, and stated the matter would be dealt with carefully. After hearing more views, the production team dropped the idea. The team then briefed the management about their latest idea, but was criticized by Mr. Tang for not doing a good enough gate-keeping job. He demanded the team to produce a chronology report of how they came up with using the Hitler character, many worried that the freedom on creativity was narrowing. In fact, the production team would come up with all sort of ideas during brainstorming, as to how the idea would be executed the production team could always be discussed. Moreover, the idea of using Hitler was only a preliminary idea and it was never executed. Regrettably, the Director of Broadcasting criticized the production team before getting to the bottom of the incident. He also openly criticized the team before the media after attending a Legco panel meeting in March, seriously hurting the morale here at RTHK.

In light of this, the RTHK Union arranged a meeting for Director of Broadcasting to exchange views with staff members. However, in a paper submitted to Legco,

Mr. Tang reiterated his criticisms on the incident, and did not include any of the views and explanation from the production team. His approach not only disregarded the views and concerns from staff members, but it was also very unfair to the team.

2.6 Acting Assistant Director of TV ceased acting because of refusal to carry out political missions?

Newspaper reports emerged on March 8, saying Forever Sze, Acting Assistant Director (TV & Corporate Businesses) would be demoted while he was appraised satisfactory and without major mistake. It was suspected that the demotion was the consequence of Mr. Sze's refusal to carry out "political missions". In response to the media enquiries on March 15, Mr. Sze said he was willing to testify in Legco under the protection of the Powers and Privileges Ordinance. It demonstrated it was not an issue concerning his personal career, but whether someone had taken politics into consideration when it came to promotion, exerting pressures on subordinates, that could affect the editorial independence of RTHK and freedom of speech.

2.7 Looking at these incidents, Mr. Tang, as the Director of Broadcasting, had been making irrational, unprofessional decisions. We can no longer put them down to isolated incidents. These incidents had seriously undermined RTHK's role as a public service broadcaster and hurt frontline staff morale. The Union fully supports Legco invoking special power to get to the bottom of the issue of Assistant Director being demoted on political consideration.

3. Editorial Independence at RTHK has been working well in the past

3.1 The Director of Broadcasting Roy Tang had openly stressed several times, that as the editor in chief, he was responsible for all editorial decisions so as to rationalize his illogical and unprofessional decisions. The Union feels that it's necessary to define clearly how editorial independence works at RTHK. Editorial independence means to make an "independent judgment based on professional knowledge", it's not the "editorial independence of the Director of Broadcasting", nor it's the "editorial independence of frontline staffs". It includes "professional discussions", "referring to superior's mechanism" and a gate-keeping process. When controversy arises, front-line staff has the duty to report to their superiors to seek professional advice. The more serious the controversy is, staff should report to even higher-ranking staff in a timely manner.

4. Position of the RTHK Programme Staff Union

4.1 Mr. Tang, the Director of Broadcasting, had made several unprofessional editorial decisions, and he had also allegedly asked staff members to carry out “political missions”. Frontline staff was concerned by how RTHK was dragged in several controversies in the past years. The Union organized several staff meetings earlier, but the explanations by the Director of Broadcasting failed to address the concerns from staff. The question - political interference - remained. The Union stresses that the system of editorial independence at RTHK has been working well, and we take the responsibility to the public very seriously. Today’s problem lies with the government “parachuting” an Administrative Officer to head RTHK. Mr. Tang has been doing his work as an Administrative Officer, and there’s clearly a conflicting role between an Administrative Officer and a chief editor in which mutual trust cannot be built. Mr. Tang has no professional knowledge for the job, nor he has any commitment to the media industry and this is strongly reflected in the predicament we see today at RTHK.

4.2 Whether RTHK’s editorial independence is “immune” from political interference involves public interest. It will affect the station’s ability to do its job as a public service broadcaster. What’s happening now is not just an “internal” and “communications” problems. These pressing issues are created because the government appointing an Administrative Officer to head RTHK by using a completely different mindset. The Union urges the government to promise that it would *never* appoint an Administrative Officer to run RTHK and let RTHK do its job - public service broadcasting.

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