



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
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Legislative Council Panel on Information, Technology and Broadcasting

Special Meeting on 11 March 2006 on the Review of Public Service Broadcasting

Submission by RTHK

Background

Since the Committee on Review of Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong was appointed in January 2006, members of the general public and the Legislative Council have expressed concerns about the impacts of the Review on the future development of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK). RTHK is committed to fully participating in the Review exercise in an open, transparent and accountable manner. On 25 January 2006, RTHK submitted to the Panel some preliminary views and the internationally endorsed principles of public service broadcasting. For this special Panel meeting, this paper addresses some major public concerns and presents broad views on three areas, namely, the distinct positioning of programming, sustainability and governance arrangements for RTHK.

Public Concerns of the Review

2. RTHK adopts a positive attitude towards the Review exercise. We have been listening carefully to the public views and taken steps to facilitate public discussions, such as by setting up a special website on “the Review of Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong”¹. We note that members of the community and the Legislative Council have expressed fairly strong concerns about the possible directions of the Review and the impacts on the future development of RTHK. As reflected in the motion debate of this Council on 8 February 2006, legislators and some members of the public are concerned that the editorial independence, the scope of programming, the resources and the future development of RTHK would be adversely affected after the Review.

¹ <http://www.rthk.org.hk/special/psb/>



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3. We believe that the Review Committee will carefully address the public concerns and expectations over public service broadcasting. As the sole public service broadcaster in Hong Kong, RTHK shares the view that the best public interests should be safeguarded and the community expectations be fulfilled through the Review exercise. The public holds high expectations that RTHK will continue playing an important role in maintaining a high standard of, as well as further developing public service broadcasting in Hong Kong. These are also RTHK's core values in serving the community.

4. In line with the public concerns and expectations described above, due recognition should be given to three interrelated issues in the Review, namely, the distinctive positioning of RTHK's programming, the sustainable funding for further development and appropriate governance model of the station.

Distinctiveness of RTHK's Programming

5. A basic and internationally endorsed principle of public service broadcasting is independence from political and commercial interests. RTHK also aspires to be a leading public broadcaster in the new media environment and accordingly upholds six core values as follows:

- Editorial Independence
- Impartiality
- Serving the Public
- Competitiveness
- Quality Production
- Development of Talent

6. The mission and core values above are manifested in the distinctive positioning of RTHK's programming. We subscribe to the following five objectives in the programming on radio, television and new media.

- First and foremost, RTHK must serve the general public in Hong Kong and its programming should cater for a broad spectrum of audiences, including the needs of minority interest groups. In this regard, RTHK's programming is distinct from



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commercial broadcasting in that the policies of editorial and production, which apply to both programmes for the general audiences and audiences of minority interests, are independent from commercial or market considerations.

- Second, RTHK seeks to inform, educate and entertain its audiences through multi-media programming. Apart from the conventional radio and television programming, RTHK has been one of the pioneers in new media in Hong Kong. For example, over 25 per cent of RTHK's web content is original, including the innovative e-learning projects, simulcast of television, radio and on the website, and podcasting, etc.
- Third, RTHK provides timely, impartial coverage of local and global events and issues through delivering news and public affairs programmes independent from political or commercial considerations.
- Fourth, RTHK provides a platform for free and unfettered expression of views, by producing radio and television forum for public participation.
- Fifth, RTHK promotes the openness and cultural diversity of Hong Kong through delivering a wide range of arts, cultural and innovative programmes for both the mass and minority audiences, which are less likely to be offered if commercial considerations are taken into account.

7. The distinctive positioning of RTHK's programming has proven to be widely accepted by the community. This has well been reflected in various quantitative indicators and independent surveys, such as the appreciation index (72.76 out of 100 in 2004), daily website hit rates (over 26 million), public impression survey by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (72.2 per cent of respondents were positive towards RTHK.) To strive for gaining trust by the public is one of RTHK's imperatives. RTHK is therefore of the view that the basic principles, scope and distinctive programming of public service broadcasting should continue and be further developed in line with community expectations and the broad objective of promoting public value in Hong Kong.



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Sustainability

8. In order to fulfil our objective of enhancing public service broadcasting, there needs to be a sustainable model to ensure that RTHK will be able to develop in a financially and operationally viable, as well as publicly accountable manner. In planning for future development, RTHK faces many critical challenges. Three major areas to ensure our sustainability are highlighted below.

9. On top of the list is RTHK's urgent need for reprovisioning. All the RTHK offices are becoming too old to embrace broadcasting development in the new media environment. Broadcasting House began operation in 1969, ETV Centre in 1971 and TV House in 1975. RTHK's reprovisioning project was planned in 1999 but was downgraded to Category C in the government works programme in 2004. In the Resource Allocation Exercise 2005, the request for upgrading the project, capital budget of \$1.1 billion, was also rejected.

10. Second, in line with the government's Digital 21 policy of promoting digital development in Hong Kong, RTHK has been actively planning for and running tests of digital audio broadcasting (DAB) and high definition television (HDTV) production. In the new media environment, RTHK has also been a local pioneer in experimenting cutting-edge Internet broadcasting services such as RTHK on the Road, podcasting and Wi-fi. It has also started looking into the potential of technology convergence (between the Internet and wireless technologies) for broadcasting. The commercial market may consider these digital developments as risky business and lacks a long term commitment. RTHK believes that building up the digital capacity will greatly enhance the quality and development potential of public service broadcasting, as well as significantly promoting the long-term development of IT and innovation in Hong Kong. RTHK lacks additional and stable funding to plan for digital development and sustainable development. Funding to be approved for a 5-Year term would be able to alleviate such constraints



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11. Third, RTHK owns a substantial archive of radio, television and new media contents of high historical and cultural value. Funding is required to preserve and promote public access to RTHK's archives as part of the Hong Kong cultural heritage.

12. The three critical challenges above illustrate an urgent need for a financially and operationally sustainable model for the sustainable development of RTHK's public service broadcasting.

Governance Framework

13. In the search for a sustainable model for RTHK to maintain and further develop its distinctive programming of public service broadcasting, a key question will inevitably be on the future model of governance and organisational structure. RTHK believes that the governance framework for a public service broadcaster must adhere to the principles of

- Public accountability,
- Institutional independence,
- Operational flexibility, and
- Sustainability.

The current organisational structure of RTHK, as a government department, has a relative advantage in public accountability but also imposes limitations in terms of ensuring institutional independence, operational flexibility and sustainability. RTHK has experienced many constraints in its operation and development partially due to the inherent limitations of its organisational status as a government department.

14. RTHK management keeps an open mind about the future organisational arrangements and will continue collating views from the public and staff in this regard. We, however, note that the option of "corporatisation" of RTHK has been one most thoroughly studied and discussed in Hong Kong since the Broadcasting Review Board report in the mid-1980s. The basic idea of "corporatisation" is to hive off RTHK from government by way of restructuring it into a statutory corporation. The statutory process of corporatising RTHK should facilitate the participation of the public, RTHK staff, other stakeholders and the Legislative Council.



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15. We therefore would suggest that the option of corporatisation of RTHK be revisited in the Review exercise. RTHK management will also consult staff accordingly.

Way Ahead

16. This paper sets out some of RTHK's views at the present stage. We will continue to fully participate in the Review by listening to the public and the Legislative Council, consulting the staff, facilitating public discussions and studying other options. RTHK will prepare a comprehensive submission to the Review Committee and present its views in an open and transparent manner.

Radio Television Hong Kong
9 March 2006