

Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting
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Public Service Broadcasting and the Future of Radio Television Hong Kong

As the uncertainties around RTHK are removed, and Hong Kong's public broadcaster looks to the future, expanding its services, moving to digital broadcasting, embracing technology, enhancing bandwidth, range and quality of programming mix, public broadcasters around the world are facing a similar, core set of challenges in their continuing quest to produce high quality programmes.

Alert to the potential of new technologies, public broadcasters have been amongst the first to take forward new initiatives. BBC iPlayer has shown itself to be something of a kite mark of new creative potential, having proved brilliantly innovative in content and ease of access, let alone in terms of a stream of international revenue, through its commercial arm and wholly-owned subsidiary, BBC Worldwide.

In the US, groundbreaking public broadcasters developed the first out-and-out digital channel given over to HDTV, saw the spectrum of possibilities inherent in the digital world, and were instrumental in the Digital Future Initiative (DFI).

But Digital Britain, a white paper released in June, received, not unexpectedly, a rather different reaction from the BBC, as it made clear a proposal to use 130b GBP of licence fee money to fund regional news and current affairs programmes on independent television, which it is said cannot afford any longer to produce unprofitable programmes. For some 33 years, the BBC held first a monopoly, and then with ITV a duopoly for 27 more.

When ITV was launched, the popular regard of a long-running radio serial, *The Archers*, an 'everyday story of country folk', was such that the Corporation could deign to schedule the tragic death of young farmer's wife, Grace Archer, killed attempting to rescue their horses from a burning barn, as a spoiler.

But today it is in news, arts, culture and children's programming, traditional PSB areas, where funds are needed. Few public broadcasting organisations, if any, have the stability of assured long term funding. Lean and unreliable revenue streams, and in RTHK's case, protracted uncertainty over its future, have arrested its development of serious programme content, R&D, new experimental work, and reaching out to wider, new audiences. For RTHK there are, perhaps, new opportunities to seize initiatives to encourage creativity in Hong Kong's community, to serve as a seeding ground for new talent, and to support the cultural aspirations of a world city. Whilst stability of

adequate revenue may not be the sole determinant of a leading public broadcaster, it is enervating without it, innervating with it.

Public broadcasting's revenue in the US, 2005, amounted to \$1.30 per citizen, in contrast to \$28 per capita in Canada and Australia, \$49 per capita in Japan, \$83 per capita in Britain, and \$85 per capita in Germany. In Hong Kong, 2007, each citizen paid approx US\$8.6 per year for RTHK.

And funding public broadcasting has been seminal to developing society at large: public funding for public good. American public broadcasters brought new content to UHF channels; sought advice from teachers for programme material for use in classrooms across the US; subtitled programmes for the hearing-impaired, and exploited the interactivity of the internet as an educational portal.

Like the BBC website, amongst ten most visited in the UK, the US pbs.org, is one of the most widely used websites in the world. PSB organisations both sides of the Atlantic have travelled faster and further than their commercial counterparts.

Audience expectations continue to evolve. Increasingly today's consumers want informed content, images, films, and arts available bite-sized, on their wristwatches and huge plasma screens.

If RTHK can deftly meet the requirements of an ever more fragmentary broad and narrow-cast environment, of viewers and listeners, and meet their expectations of airtime, of programming when they want it, and through whatever means or platform they choose, and if earmarked resources can be put aside for R&D, the possibilities for strengthening its service to the public and adding value to education, galvanising community engagement and enhancing Hong Kong's media landscape and cultural environment, are legion. It all might sound rather Kiplingesque, but rapidity of technological change has brought new challenges and meant the old shibboleths of broadcasting no longer have currency save for Reithian moral imperatives: quality and trust.

RTHK can continue to earn the trust and confidence of Hong Kong people, to build on its 80-year storied history, its record of public service, its reputation for quality programming, production capacity, and its trusted, unfettered editorial – the spine of RTHK. It has new opportunities now to build on its accomplishments.

PSB organisations in the US are some of the most trusted national institutions, and perhaps it is no coincidence that when the BBC's new Charter took effect in 2007, it marked what it saw as a radical change to the way the Corporation was governed, and the BBC Trust became its new governing body.

The BBC Board of Governors' powers were divided, replaced by two separate new bodies – the BBC Trust and an Executive Board. Subsequent changes were seen as largely positive for a Corporation taken aback by a dispute with Government over Iraq and censured in a subsequent review by Lord Hutton.

Dual roles as cheerleader and regulator did not sit easily, it was said, in a public organisation of the scale and complexity as the BBC. It lacked clarity and accountability.

Forewarnings were made to the Corporation of it needing to remain true to its public service broadcasting values, rather than pursue commercial interests. "It should not play copycat or chase ratings for ratings' sake," Tessa Jowell, Culture Secretary, said at the time. In essence it was left intact, said the Times Media Editor of the day, and it remained largely free to govern itself. Today, there are signs of the BBC not entirely heeding the Secretary's advice, and criticisms of it discarding core PSB programming to digital projects.

The question inevitably asked of public service broadcasters is to what extent they are broadcasting organisations per se, or primarily serve as platform for stakeholder interests. Seen as a public good, keeping faith with the ideology of PSB no doubt, but is their primary objective that of their own making, all be it informed by advisory groups and critical insights from user groups, or that of furthering the objectives of stakeholders? Whose interests are being advanced? Recent changes driven by Mark Thompson, Director-general at the BBC, for instance, were seen by some as not sitting well with the Corporation's journalistic provenance, nor with the Reithian dictum to 'educate, entertain and inform'. But then Reith held to the moral high ground, identified the BBC with the political establishment of the time whilst insisting upon its operational independence from political pressures.

Public broadcasting was born with the BBC in 1926, France and Italy made the transition to public service broadcasting in the 1960s and 70s, so too West Germany, Spain, Portugal and Greece. With broader political change and the transition to democracy, the emergence of PSB began in Eastern European Countries after 1989. France, Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, remains a strong public broadcaster, promoting quality and diversity, the French language and culture. Australia's ABC showed the potential, integrity and values of public service radio as early as 1932 with its broadcasting of the Bodyline tour.

But the questions are defining and determine the way PSBs are structured, organised and financed. They move the debate beyond a transmission model of broadcasting, to one of strategic concern necessary in public service communication, and in balancing sometimes contrary interests. Without addressing those there remains confusion and potential for recurrent

tensions and endemic opposing forces within PSB organisational structures, for inherent stakeholder misunderstandings and the precise nature of PSB community partnerships forged, still more of breaking the all-important connection between broadcaster and those paying for its public service.

Then there are the respective interest groups, stakeholders, policy-makers and governments who view PSBs with different perspectives, may hold different expectations of them, and exert different pressures. The BBC faced pressure to take programmes off the air as early as 1932, when an interview with a former First World War German commander was scheduled.

It has since seen a series of disputes on foreign policy – Suez and the Falklands are but two – has been regarded as insufficiently supportive of governments of the day. During Tony Blair’s premiership, both its chairman and director-general stood down over the David Kelly affair.

Distinct groups may be quite unlike another in their norms or expectations, may be uncomfortable with agendas of others, and for that reason see their representation at the governance table as essential. Yet at some point there has to be agreement on commonalities, and on consequential benefits to the communities being served, as well as in clarity over how to move ahead in an informed, efficient, and accountable way. PSB boards too large, as with overcomplicated organisational structures – the BBC’s was once said to be Byzantine – risk adding agendas, losing focus and provoke disjunction between members.

For RTHK there are new relationships to be established with its advisory board, and understandable concerns over the nature of the board’s corporate governance role to be allayed – its new Charter notwithstanding – as well as partnerships to be strengthened with overseas producers and shared reference points renewed within its own community. The spur to do so comes in the form of an anticipated public consultation process on how RTHK might take forward its mandate as Hong Kong’s public service broadcaster, chart its overall direction in programming in the decades to come, and meet the core challenge facing public service broadcasters today: the transition to public service media.

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