



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
香港電台

10 Questions and Answers for Public Service Broadcasting

The ten Q&A below explains in simple terms the basic concept of public broadcasting.

1. What is a public broadcaster?

According to the World Radio and Television Council, public broadcasting should be serving the public and independent of commercial or government influence. The public broadcaster should be a publicly owned broadcasting institution funded by the public through different means, e.g. in the form of television licence fee, funds allocated by government or parliament, donations from foundations, sponsorship, or even revenue from sales. In Hong Kong, RTHK is a government department with funds coming directly from the government to serve the public.

Public broadcasters best known to Hong Kong include: NHK, KBS, BBC, ABC, SBS and PBS.

2. How is public broadcasting different from other broadcasters?

A broadcaster operates in one of the following modes: commercial venture, state broadcaster or publicly owned institution. Quite often there is confusion between the roles of a state broadcaster and that of a public broadcaster. Differentiation between the two can be made in terms of the broadcaster's function and structure. There are also stations providing broadcasting services externally, with a specific role that differs from that of public broadcaster. VOA and BBC World Service are examples of broadcasters bearing the mission of publicizing the country's foreign policy, an operating mode quite different from that of a public broadcaster's.

3. Why is there the need for public broadcasting service?

Before the development of modern day technologies, there was limited radio frequency spectrum available for broadcasting. It was considered that the spectrum was a scarce public asset, and should not be utilized by only business enterprises and the state. The view was that part of the air -waves should be retained for public use, and this was



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
香港電台

where the concept of public service broadcasting came about.

The emergence of public service broadcasting meant that the community could not entirely trust market-orientated commercial enterprises, and at the same time felt dubious whether a state broadcaster would present news in an impartial manner. Public broadcasting is, to a much lesser extent, subject to market and political influence and has earned the trust of the public.

4. What is the importance of public broadcasting?

The editorial policy of a public broadcaster should be independent, and the production of programmes should follow a set of professional rules, among which impartiality is an important element. News coverage by different media organizations is presented with varying perspectives and different values. A public broadcaster, being neither state nor commercially run, is able to deliver programming and news coverage in a credible and unbiased manner.

In a recent survey on public perception towards RTHK conducted by Chinese University of Hong Kong, over 70% of the respondents had an overall good impression of RTHK, with 65% of the respondents of the view that RTHK's news and information were credible. It remains RTHK's objective that discussion topics and news coverage are presented in an impartial, credible manner.

5. What is the function of public service broadcasting?

When the BBC was established in 1927, its first director-general John Reith put forward that the three main functions of a public service broadcaster were to “inform, educate and entertain”. A public broadcaster should serve the public, while at the same time cater for minority interests. In Hong Kong, classical music, Cantonese opera, programmes for the elderly and educational programmes are, in general, at risk in the commercial market. RTHK, as a public broadcaster, shoulders the responsibility to provide these minority interest programmes, and has earned the public's appreciation over the years.



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
香港電台

6. What type of programmes should a public broadcaster produce?

The main distinction between a public and a commercial broadcaster lies in that the ultimate aim of a commercial broadcaster is to make profits while a public broadcaster attempts to deliver high quality programming to serve the public. The latter, in the absence of commercial pressure, can put in more resources to produce quality programmes.

Take the BBC's productions as examples. "The Human Body" took over five years to produce; the production of the "Blue Planet" series took years to prepare, with a budget of over seven million pounds. RTHK's "Success Stories" and "A Century of Dream Factory" series are good examples of high quality programmes. After determining the personalities for the "Success Stories" series, production staff took tremendous effort in carrying out research work, getting to know the interviewees, and shooting each and every episode.

RTHK is also committed to enhancing the promotion of culture and arts. "The Young Chinese Musician" series introduced young musicians not widely known to the community at large. The series was originally considered not popular for prime time screening, and yet gained popular response. Free from the constraints of commercial concerns, RTHK has a mission to take the lead in producing programmes innovative in theme and style. Over the years, RTHK has pioneered in the production of phone-in programmes, music award presentations, television forums, public affairs documentaries and docudramas.

7. Where does a public broadcaster draw its finance from?

Production of quality programmes requires a large and stable source of income, which is an important issue for the public broadcaster. In this respect, public broadcasters around the world have different operating modes. Some derive their main source of income from television licence fees, while others rely on government funding, or revenue from sales and sponsorship.

CBC and ABC operate with funding from the government, while BBC and NHK draw their income from licence fees. Some public broadcasters rely on donation and



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
香港電台

sponsorship, e.g. PBS. There are also public broadcasters relying on revenue from advertising, pay services and other commercial activities to finance their main services. Funding from commercial sources, however, should not become the public broadcaster's main income if its independence is to be maintained.

RTHK receives an annual allocation of over 400 million HK dollars from the government. It is roughly estimated that on average, each citizen contributes \$61 to RTHK to meet its operating cost. Compared to other overseas public broadcasters – a UK citizen contributing equivalent of HK\$718 to the BBC, and a Japanese citizen HK\$344 to NHK, the revenue for Hong Kong's public broadcasting is relatively low (see table below).

Comparison of public funds received by different public broadcasters (2004/05)

Public Broadcaster	Public Funding (HK\$)	Annual Contribution per citizen (HK\$)
NHK	~ 43481 M	344
BBC	~ 40051 M	718
ABC	~ 4489 M	225
RTHK	~ 428.5 M	61

8. What is the framework for the regulation and governance of a public broadcaster?

Generally speaking, a public broadcaster is run by a board of governors or directors set up by legislation. The station complies with codes issued by the regulatory body. In our case, the day-to-day operation of RTHK is governed by three sets of conventions. The "Framework Agreement" between the government and RTHK specifies RTHK's editorial independence, and that the Director of Broadcasting is the editor-in-chief of RTHK. In addition, with its status as a government department and without a board of directors, RTHK has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Broadcasting Authority on complying with the BA's regulations voluntarily. In 1998, "RTHK's Producers' Guidelines" was formulated to codify its existing editorial policies and practices in order to enhance transparency and accountability of RTHK's operation.



RADIO TELEVISION HONG KONG
香港電台

9. What is the relationship between the government and a public broadcaster?

Most public broadcasters are neither government departments nor under state control. Generally, they are operated and managed by an independent institution representing the interests of the public, and enjoying editorial autonomy. Independence of a Public broadcaster is usually guaranteed by legislation, with its functions specified in a charter, and its board of directors coming from all walks of life.

The important point is that a public broadcaster should “be kept at a distance from the government”, with the board of directors handling matters of general policy, while a CEO or Managing Director responsible for its day-to-day operations.

10. What are the challenges ahead for public broadcasters?

With the advancement in technologies and the onset of digital broadcasting, the audiences have been turned from passive recipients to become active “users”.

Public broadcasters have to adapt themselves to keep abreast of the technological changes, and attempt to provide a better and more diversified service.

In Hong Kong, RTHK has undergone many changes throughout the years, but the core missions remain unchanged: to provide credible information and good quality programmes, and to serve the general public while at the same time cater to the needs of minority interests. These aims are well treasured and recognized by the public. On the technology front, digital broadcasting will come into service at 2007, and there will be more free-to-air television channels. At the moment, we are also conducting trials on digital radio broadcasting. We are looking at a multi-platform future and are confident that there will be room for development of our public broadcasting service.

-End-