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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Ling, Pek Ling.</td>
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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1995</td>
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<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2829">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2829</a></td>
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POLICY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK GOVERNING
PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

Ms Ling Pek Ling
Director, Policy and Planning
Singapore Broadcasting Authority

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I am honoured to have the privilege of sharing with you Singapore's policy and approach towards regulating public service broadcasting.

In the last couple of years, major changes were made to the broadcasting climate in Singapore as a result of developments in the region. Subscription TV was introduced in 1992, when Singapore Cablevision started 3 encrypted UHF channels. This doubled the number of local TV channels available. In June this year, Singapore Cablevision launched a 24-channel cable TV service.

In the realm of free-to-air traditional broadcasting, we witnessed the corporatisation of our national broadcaster, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation as the first major step towards being privatised. With these changes, the Singapore government has taken a new approach towards public service broadcasting in Singapore.

During the next few minutes, I will be providing you with a general overview of public service broadcasting in Singapore. I will focus on four main areas. I will first touch on the corporatisation of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation and the changes which were made, in response to that. From there, I would focus on the definition of public service programmes (PSBs) in the Singapore context and the concerns and regulatory policies which govern the provision of these PSBs. I will go on to discuss the Singapore Broadcasting Authority’s rationale and approach in subsidising PSBs and how SBA monitors the quantity and quality of these PSBs.

Corporatisation of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation

On 1 October 1994, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation was corporatised into 4 subsidiaries held by Singapore International Media (SIM) Pte Ltd. The four subsidiaries are the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), Television Twelve Pte Ltd (TV 12), Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS) and SIM Communications Pte Ltd (SIMCOM). This move was to allow the broadcasters greater operational flexibility to strengthen themselves to compete in an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment. However, the government recognised that there was a need to ensure that programming was not dictated solely by commercial considerations and quality was not compromised by financial constraints. Broadcasting still had to play its role of informing and educating the public. Hence, a new statutory board, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) was formed to regulate the industry and oversee the provision of PSBs in informing and educating the public.
Definition of Public Service Broadcasts

Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) programmes are programmes which are desirable to society, but which are often not commercially viable. They serve to inform and educate the general public about important social/community issues and policies. For example, news, documentaries and other info-educational programmes keep our viewers informed of current affairs and other useful knowledge. Due to the racial and cultural diversity in Singapore, PSBs have to cater to the four main language groups. Hence, we include minority language, (i.e. Malay and Indian) programmes in our definition of PSBs, along with other special interest programmes such as cultural, local sports, and children’s programmes. SBA also encourages the broadcast of locally produced programmes as these programmes present values and issues from the Singapore point of view and are tailored to our needs and preferences.

Locally produced programmes are also the key to the local broadcasters’ staying competitive in the seas of foreign programmes from cable and satellite TV. With the influx of foreign competition, local broadcasters have to provide their viewers a reassuring sense of belonging, something which the viewer will feel familiar and comfortable with.

Regulatory Framework to Govern PSBs

Locally produced programmes, together with the other PSBs can be expensive. Moreover, they do not usually attract as much advertising revenue as more commercial genres and series. Even the popular locally produced programmes are expensive compared to acquired programmes as they incur high production costs.

SBA recognises that left on their own, broadcasters might sacrifice PSBs in the interest of the bottom line. As such, we regulate the amount of PSBs each station should carry and what form they should take. Obligations are placed on all radio and TV broadcasters to carry a minimum amount of PSBs as part of their licence. SBA also stipulates a minimum requirement for these programmes to be aired during prime time - 7 to 11pm. One guiding principle was that viewers should get at least the same amount of PSBs as they had before SBC was corporatised.

The level of PSB programmes in Singapore is currently about one third of total broadcast time. TCS, being the dominant national TV station in Singapore provides mass entertainment and about 68 hours per week of PSBs in English and Mandarin over its two channels, Channel 5 and Channel 8, along with 84 hours of locally produced programmes. TV 12 focuses on niche programming, catering to special interest programming such as culture, sports and minority languages (i.e. Malay and Tamil) on its Channels 12 and 24. It carries about 60 hours per week of PSBs. The Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS) caters to a multi-racial and multi-cultural audience by devoting 3 of its 10 domestic channels to minority language broadcasts and one channel to classical music.

Subsidizing of PSBs

Broadcasting is not a highly profitable business in Singapore, given our small advertising base. It is not commercially feasible for our local stations to broadcast all the PSB programmes at their own expense as they do not attract enough advertising revenue.

Left on their own, broadcasters would tend to cut down on such programmes or broadcast them at fringe hours only, in order to stay financially viable. This is especially so, as
the number of channels is limited, airtime is finite and opportunity costs of using the airtime tend to be high.

Thus, SBA contracts with the broadcasters, at an agreed price, the production and broadcast of some PSBs. Currently, SBA subsidizes S$87 million (US$60m) worth of PSB programmes on TV and Radio. SBA’s funds for PSBs comes from Radio and TV licence fees and a government grant. The household TV and radio licence fee is S$110 (US$75) per annum, while the car radio licence fee is S$27 (US$18) per annum. The government gives SBA a grant pegged at 15% of licence fee revenue.

Monitoring PSBs

As the industry regulator, SBA has to ensure that the broadcasters carry quality PSBs. This is particularly important since SBA is paying for some of the PSB programmes from public funds. SBA regularly reviews the quantity, range and quality of PSBs in consultation with independent advisory bodies such as its Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) to ensure that PSBs meet public expectation. The Programme Advisory Committee has five Special Interest Subcommittees, namely the Info-educational, Children, Culture, Sports and Entertainment Subcommittees to better cover the full range of PSBs. We also get feedback from surveys, discussion groups and letters from the public to help us understand public needs and desires on programming matters.

In the long term, SBA would continue to ensure that there is sufficient range and quantity of PSB programmes to educate the general public and to cater to our Malay and Indian viewers through licence conditions. We would like to see our broadcasters develop to a position where they are less independent on SBA’s subsidy for PSB programmes. The challenge then is to grow the broadcasting industry. This, SBA seeks to do through an enlightened regulatory framework as well as through development initiatives. As a new and young authority, we are eager to hear from experienced broadcasters and regulators such as yourselves how we can better balance the objectives of public service broadcasting and commercial viability in Singapore.