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REGULATING FOR QUALITY FROM THE COMMERCIAL SECTOR

The topic of my speech today is *Regulating for Quality from the Commercial Sector*. It set me thinking about quality and what it means today.

I used to work in a television station, the former Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. I began my career as a producer, and I remember we were drilled on the notion that we had to produce quality documentaries. In the early years we had the luxury of three months to do quality documentaries - one month for research, three weeks for filming and another 3-4 weeks of editing. We did produce quality documentaries, but the output of each producer was small - about 3 to 4 documentaries a year. That was in the early 80s when quality, not money was an important consideration.

Since then the whole broadcasting environment in Singapore has changed. It is now a private, commercial environment which is vibrant and market oriented. The public broadcaster, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, corporatised in 1994. It has grown into five companies, three of which are broadcasters, namely, the Television Corporation of S'pore, Singapore Television Twelve, and the Radio Corporation of S'pore.

These companies can be considered commercial in a sense that they are corporatised and are free to earn and retain their revenue from sponsorship and commercials. At the same time, they are also our national broadcasters and are required to produce and air public service programmes such as news, current affairs and information programmes.

With corporatisation, and the need to control resources and be financially viable, the production cycle has also been speeded up. Documentaries, which are an expensive form of production, have given way to TV magazine programmes which can be churned out on a weekly basis. Programmes are judged by their ability to attract audiences and earn revenue.

So what has become of the notion of quality? Do private broadcasters care about it? Can quality be maintained without regulation?

Let's look at the notion of quality. A producer will tell you that it should include good filming, editing, well-crafted commentary and appropriate use of music and special effects.
A TV programmer, working in the commercial sector, will probably tell you that it’s better to have a programme that rates, and earns revenue, rather than a quality programme that nobody watches. So do people still believe in quality programming? How do we encourage it?

I’m now with the Singapore Broadcasting Authority and one of our jobs is to encourage local broadcasters to produce quality programmes. How do we do it? There are a number of ways.

One substantial way is through the funding of public service programmes, aired by commercial broadcasters. The money comes from the collection of TV and Radio licence fees, plus a government grant. With this money, SBA is able to fund public service programmes on TCS, STV12 and RCS.

Public service programmes are defined as programmes which are socially and nationally desirable, but which may not be commercially viable. These include: news, current affairs, information, culture and children’s programming. As you’ve noticed, I’m equating public service programmes with quality programming, as these programmes are informational and educational in nature and have the capacity for quality.

Broadcasters like TCS and STV12, are given funding on an annual basis to produce an agreed number of hours for each genre. In this way, SBA ensures that the broadcaster sets aside a portion of its airtime (including prime time) for public service programming.

For RCS, funding is provided for arts and minority language programming. Financial support is given to Warna and Ria, which are Malay stations, and Oli, an Indian language station. A subsidy is also given for two arts stations - Symphony, which airs classical music, and a new Arts Radio station which went on air in December. The other English and Chinese stations are not funded as they are expected to be commercially viable.

Apart from funding, TV and radio broadcasters are also expected, as part of the licence agreement, to put out a certain number of hours of public service programmes, at their own expense. This ensures a degree of responsibility, on the part of the free-to-air broadcaster, to provide quality and informational programming for their audience.

A question one might ask, is how can funding and licensing ensure quality? To some extent, it cannot. We can persuade the broadcaster to produce and air public service programmes, and we can help to facilitate the process by providing funding, but the broadcaster must, on its own, want to achieve and maintain quality.
And to some extent, this is happening. Our local broadcasters know that there is competition from cable and neighbouring broadcasters, and at some point in time, there will be competition from foreign broadcasters. So they will need to gear themselves, to prepare for competition. One way is to strengthen local programming and quality is an important factor - this is something both broadcasters and SBA would like to see happening.

Another way to encourage quality is to commission programmes from broadcasters and be involved in the production process. SBA has made a small start by commissioning an arts series - ARTITUDE - from a local broadcaster, STV 12. The process works like this - we set up a small editorial team comprising representatives from the TV station, the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board and SBA. We brainstorm stories to be produced, and before each episode goes on air, the editorial team has a final look to ensure that it is of sufficient quality. The creative approaches are left entirely to the broadcaster.

ARTITUDE is a series that has worked well for us because it is the first regular arts series to be shown on television in Singapore. It started in 1996 and by April this year, the fourth series will be produced. Without funding, this series may never have taken off because it’s difficult to find sponsors for arts programmes which do not rate as well as entertainment programmes. We’re hoping to build up an audience for arts programmes, and this is just one example of how we can promote quality and help broadcasters at the same time.

Another way to promote quality is to encourage local broadcasters to work with independent production houses. SBA is a partner in a scheme known as LIUP - the local industry upgrading programme. Under this scheme, both SBA and the Economic Development Board provide funding - about 50% - to local broadcasters to encourage them to commission programmes from independent production houses. Funds are used to provide seed money for new programmes which broadcasters want to produce, but may not have the resources. In this way, SBA helps to stimulate the growth of independent production houses and to broaden the talent pool in the broadcasting industry.

There is, of course, no guarantee of quality. Some production houses have never produced for TV before and need to hone up on skills such as research and scripting. But there are many others which offer new production approaches and they do help to lift the quality and range of programmes offered on television. TCS is presently working with local film-maker Eric Khoo, to produce English drama for television. The series is a LIUP project, partially funded by EDB and SBA. Eric’s movie, 12 Storeys, (released last year) takes a hard, gritty look at life in an HDB flat. With his experience, Eric will certainly bring fresh insights to English drama on television.
All these measures, such as funding and commissioning of programmes, are ways in which SBA can facilitate the production of quality programmes, at the same time, giving flexibility to broadcasters to come up with their own creative ideas and ways of presentation.

For other programmes which are not funded by SBA, broadcasters are given full rein to produce and acquire programmes which entertain and inspire, with only one proviso - that all programmes must meet a minimal acceptable standard - and this is described in the Programme and Advertising Codes. The aim is to ensure that broadcast programmes are acceptable to the majority in our multi-racial society.

Contrary to what some people might think, SBA does not censor programmes - we leave it to the broadcasters. But we do give them guidelines on what needs to be censored, and this would include: a time belt for family viewing; the need to preserve racial and religious harmony, as well as public morals and social values. Sensitive areas would include pornography and gratuitous scenes of violence. We also need to ensure that there is a balance between airtime for commercials and the programme proper, so that commercial considerations do not override viewer enjoyment.

I must add that these guidelines are for free-to-air broadcasters and the Singapore Cable Vision, who air programmes for Singaporeans.

When all’s said and done, we at SBA do not see ourselves as the sole arbiter of public morality - we listen closely to the community. We are advised by several committees who look at Malay, Indian and Chinese programmes, children’s programmes, and programmes on information, sports and entertainment. Our advisory panels are drawn from responsible and informed members of society, who have a pulse on the community and can help express their needs and aspirations with regard to the range and quality of programming. We listen to them, and from them we know how much the public will accept, and what it expects from our broadcasters.

Our hope is that the community at large will be more forthcoming in terms of what quality programmes it expects. Members of the public should be encouraged to speak up and air their views on what sort of movies they would like to watch, what they expect from news and current affairs, and whether they prefer cartoons or educational children’s programmes; only then can we have a culture of quality, which comes, not from the regulator, but from the public at large and the man in the street.

In the end, quality is not the sole purview of the regulator. It should be the concern of the public and also the broadcaster. Broadcasters must strike a balance between commercial considerations and a more altruistic goal - which is to harness the media, not only to entertain, but also to inform and educate - this can only come about with quality programming.
SBA's mission is to develop "quality broadcasting" and to make Singapore a dynamic broadcasting hub. With the help of the broadcasting industry and the community, we are confident that this is a goal we can achieve.