

After a long campaign Public Service Broadcasting in Taiwan is entering a new era says Vivien Wang

A bright future

The creation of a broadcasting group fully owned by and operated for the public is a central issue on the agenda of media reform in Taiwan. It is an essential part of improving Taiwan's media environment, and a crucial step in the consolidation of Taiwan's democratization.

Taiwan has a population of only 23 million. It emerged on the world stage in the early 1980s as one of the 'economic miracles' in the region, and then in the early 1990s was notable for its democratization. This nation's authoritarian background also appears to be fading into the distance as its robust democracy develops.

MEDIA REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Media democratization has an important place in the history of Taiwan's political transition. In the 1950s and 1970s, alternative political magazines served as watchdogs and challenged state authority. This tradition was continued in the 1980s and early 1990s by alternative videos and illegal cable and radio stations which gave voice to political opposition. But developments in illegal or underground media since the 1980s carry deeper meanings. They can be seen as an alternative way of addressing the notion of media democratization, and as reflecting the struggle against the media monopoly of the party-state. The media outlets themselves had to be the object of reform.

Political control of society, embedded in Taiwan's media structure, has been described by academic Lee Chin-chuan as a 'triple alliance of the government, the party and the military.' Since the late 1980s, 'oppose the media monopoly' and 'separate the party, the

government and the military from the broadcast media' have been the main slogans of the media reform movement. The word 'party' previously referred to the ubiquitous Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT). But recently, as the KMT has lost its political dominance, the term has come to refer to political forces in general. Nevertheless, the pace and scale of media reform are unsatisfactory. In addition to political factors, commercial interference is a serious concern as well. A structural change is long overdue.

THE GOALS OF RESTRUCTURING THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING MEDIA

So, what kinds of reform are needed? What do they aim to achieve? It is important to note at the outset that media reform is about more than righting historical wrongs. Media reform aims to better serve the public. Its intention is to fully realize human potential in available media formats. It aims for members of the public to equip themselves for life in a democracy by recognizing the existence of fellow citizens, acknowledging our commonality and respecting difference. In short, it represents the Taiwanese pursuit of an enhanced democracy. It is the vision of a better society.

The formation of a public broadcasting service fulfills these aims in every respect. Those who see the public media as a solution for Taiwan's media problems point to two major goals: to trigger positive changes in the regulatory environment and to enrich the diversity of media content.

In reviewing the development of government regulation, we find that it more or less followed

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the media's lead and that it has procrastinated throughout. A few examples of this can be provided. When the Broadcasting and Television Law was released in 1976, television had already been in place for more than fourteen years. That law did not undergo significant structural revisions until late 2003 when a section was added forbidding political interference in the management of media outlets. Second, in 1993, the Cable Television Law was passed; the legislation which was long overdue as community antennae had emerged as early as the late 1970s, compounded by the popularity of illegal cable-television services throughout the 1980s. Third, public television stalled over a long, interim period of 18 years before the passage of the Public Television Law in 1997, which was, nevertheless, more a political compromise than a legislative vision to create a public media sector.

Establishing a public service broadcasting group would restructure the media's regulatory environment. In doing so, it is hoped that broadcasting resources will be integrated and better utilized. It is also hoped that public service broadcasting would take the lead in digital television development, in which a common digital platform would be developed within a public service structure.

The second goal of media reform is to enrich the diversity of media content. Previously, however, a hesitant and reluctant government did little as media conglomerations advanced their interests. The 1990s therefore saw media content become increasingly commercialized as a result of intense competition. Take cable services as an example. All seven of the cable news channels have adopted an extreme tabloid style 24 hours a day. Such circumstances have only made the contrast with PTS content starker.

People carry high expectations for public



PTS former chairman Wu Feng-shan

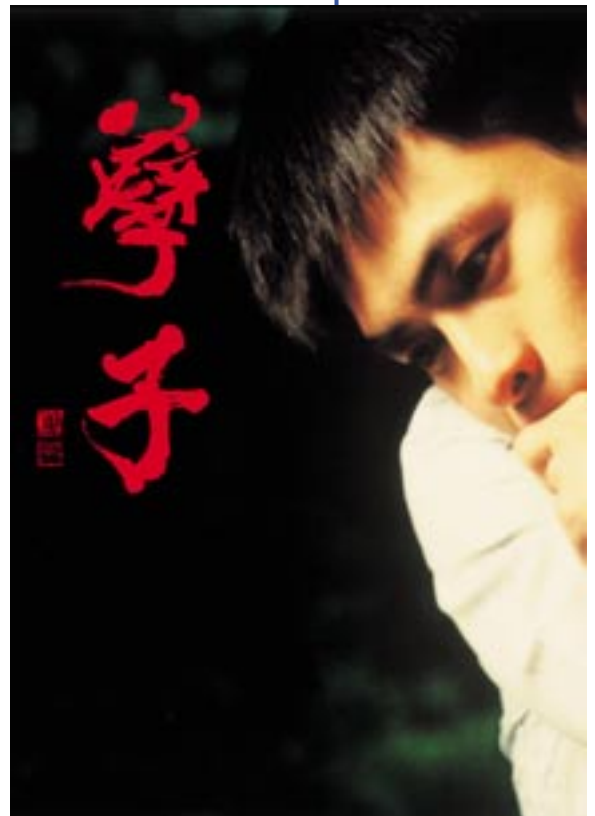
television. In the mid-1990s, when the Public Television Bill was reviewed in the Legislature, it attracted widespread support from discontented audiences, especially minority groups to whom the commercial sector had been reluctant to cater. So far, in six years, the resulting Public Television Service (PTS) has been prominent in innovative programming. A new benchmark of quality and freshness has been set for the industry. However, on the regulatory front it has been a different story. The review process for PTS in mid-1990s saw an attempt to establish a fiscal link between the commercial and public segments of the industry: by levying terrestrial television stations, it was hoped a stable funding source for the public service could be secured. That proposal was strongly opposed by the terrestrial stations.

Indeed, PTS has yet to receive full-blooded support from the government. Instead of being fully financed, the organization has had to make do with being 'small and beautiful.' Government funding was to be reduced annually, and an assessment was to take place at the end of the first three years to determine if the service would continue. These provisions were criticized by PTS former chairman Wu Feng-shan as emaciating. He said they would 'result in the demise of the viability of PTS.'

TOWARDS A PUBLIC BROADCAST MEDIA

As the 2000 presidential election approached, there appeared to be new hope for the development of public media. With the assistance of media-reform activists, Democratic Progressive Party candidate Chen Shui-bian released a Communication Policy White Paper. In it he promised

(1) to amend or discontinue unreasonable financial specifications in the Public Television



Multi award-winning PTS drama *Crystal Boys*

Law,

(2) to assess the capacity of PTS to see if it is capable of providing services unavailable from commercial broadcasters,

(3) to restore full ownership of two free-to-air television stations – the Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV) and the Chinese Television System (CTS) - in which the government was already the dominant shareholder, thus promoting cooperation and collaboration between the services and PTS and lifting the quality of the service they offered, and

(4) to legislate the separation of ownership and management to ensure a professional and independent free-to-air sector. In short, Chen argued for the formation of a public terrestrial television group to improve the diversity and professionalism of Taiwan’s mediascape. It was the first time that the issue of how to strengthen the public sector had entered the policy arena.

POLITICAL CHANGE

Chen was elected president in March 2000. But this did not guarantee that campaign commitments would be honored. From 2001 to 2003, the direction of policy would swing back and forth. A number of options emerged but the government only seemed to be weighing consequences and hesitating to take action.

Initially, it appeared that the government would deliver on its promises. A committee was set up and reports commissioned. As the issue of digitalization became more prominent, however, the government fell back on rhetoric insisting that digitalization would be a magical



cure for the country’s media ills. It also began to question the feasibility and efficiency of the proposed public television group. The idea of ‘making the channels publicly owned’, was conflated with ‘nationalization’ and gradually came to be seen as regressive. Intense public discussion and robust exchanges between politicians and spin doctors followed, but despite the high profile the subject enjoyed, 2001 ended up seeing little more than increased divergence in opinion.

As the government pondered the future of CTS and TTV, PTS was lobbying for the Public Television Law to be amended so that it could acquire a more secure financial base. After three years of prominent achievements, PTS achieved its targets in late 2001. The organization would receive annual funding of NT\$900 million (around US\$26.5 million) from the government, and the stipulation that PTS be prevented from producing a daily news service was lifted.

PUBLIC PROTEST

The year 2002 saw increasing mobilization of public support for publicly owned media. The first half of the year saw some legislators attempt to resolve problems of ownership and structure in terrestrial television. The ‘Sunlight Team’ was formed, which identified and evaluated eight policy options. It stressed the diversity in a middle-way approach and encouraged the



government to further consider this direction. The second half of 2002 saw a civic group called 'The Alliance for Democracy in Television' hold a high-profile protest against government procrastination on media reform. It was a group formed in 2000 by media academics, workers, students and other interested parties, with the aim of supervising and pressuring the government to realize its promises proposed in the Communication Policy White Paper. The Alliance actively participated in the policy process and released regular commentaries and policy recommendations.

Three representatives from the Alliance took seats on the board of directors at TTV and CTS, which the government had offered them in 2000. But in early October 2002, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the introduction of television in Taiwan, the three representatives resigned, while the Alliance disbanded to register the strongest possible protest against the government. Soon after that, the government responded by saying it would adopt 'one public, one private' as a direction for reform.

Media reform therefore reached a pivotal stage, with amendments to the Broadcasting and Television Law and a bill drafted to establish a public television station/media group. Civic forces were mobilized to form a new group, the Campaign for Media Reform, in April 2003 to supervise policy development and raise public awareness. The first substantial step toward reform was not achieved until December 2003, when an amended Broadcasting and Television Law excluded political influence from the broadcast media, so that by early 2005, all political parties were required to sell off shares and cease operations within radio and television. It has been a long wait, but it is surely a big step for media reform and democratization in this country.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A second big step in the setting up of publicly owned media is currently being considered. The government is taking a gradual approach, while the Campaign for Media Reform is developing a much more aggressive proposal. In August 2004, PTS former chairman Wu Feng-shan outlined his vision for a public media group. Other than PTS publicly owned media would include two free-to-air television stations (CTS, TTV and



Programming for Taiwan's indigenous peoples: 'Face to Face with the Clans'

their digital channels), an international television service, two cable channels for minority groups (the current Hakka television station and a proposed television station for indigenous people), a digital mobile television channel and a number of radio stations currently run by the government. In doing so, it is argued, existing resources would be more efficiently utilized. Wu is also proposing a monthly household levy of NT\$100 - attached to the electricity bill - to help fund the media network.

More encouraging news arrived in September 2004. The Legislature began its second session for the year, and the Draft Bill for Transferring Official Shares of Broadcasting Enterprises was on the agenda. In addition, the nation's media regulator, the Government Information Office (GIO), officially announced that it will begin the process of transferring CTS to public ownership. At the end of September, through a democratic review process, the third Board of PTS was formed. With a vision of media reform, this Board demonstrates the government's commitment to forming a public media group.

In establishing a public service broadcasting group, we look forward to a brighter future for this country's media environment.

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