Public Television and Empowerment in Taiwan

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Introduction

A rich and varied literature has assessed the contribution that the media have made to regime transition in many parts of the world, most notably in Latin America (Fox, 1988; Skidmore, 1993), and post-Communist Europe (Millard, 1998: 85–105). Western academe has now turned its gaze towards Asia, publishing assessments of the role the media – as political agents - have played in the political life of that continent (for example, McCargo, 2002; Kitley, 2003; Donald, Keane & Hong, 2003; Rawnsley & Rawnsley, 2003). Several studies have analysed the relationship between democratisation and the media in Taiwan, and have concluded that the media helped to weaken authority rule there and encouraged the consolidation of democracy (Rawnsley & Rawnsley, 1998: 106–24). Most authors focus on understanding how the media interact with 'emancipatory politics', a term developed by Anthony Giddens (1991: 209–31) to describe the kind of normative politics that characterise regime transition, emphasising 'rights', 'equality' and 'justice'. Giddens contrasts this with 'life politics', which he refers to as the agenda of issues that challenge political and public behaviour once political emancipation has been achieved. While the routine of the expanding election culture served to empower the

people of Taiwan during the 1970s and 1980s (Rawnsley & Rawnsley, 2001: 45–62), popular attention focused in the 1990s on issues of immediate concern to citizens. The environment, pollution, unemployment, housing, problems in Taiwan's agricultural sector and fears about the nuclear industry – Taiwan's own 'life politics' agenda – were all prominent political concerns routinely reported and discussed in the media. These subjects became more prominent after the 2000 presidential election marked the beginning of Taiwan's democratic consolidation.

This paper arises from the conviction that a careful analysis of public television in Taiwan will provide a greater understanding of the relationship between emancipation, life politics, and the media. Taiwan's public television system has been broadcasting across the island since the early 1980s, though it was under total government control for the first decade of its existence. However, with the deepening political liberalisation towards the end of the 1980s, the plan to transform this service into an independent public television station emerged as a focus of debate among elites at the beginning of the 1990s. The animated debates on the structure, financing, content, and role of public television reflected the growth of civil society that has enriched the political life of Taiwan since the lifting of martial law in 1987.

The following discussion will demonstrate the close relationship between politics and the media in Taiwan. In particular, we will see that liberalisation and democratisation were, on their own, insufficient conditions to encourage the growth of media with links to civil society. Democratisation in Taiwan was essentially an elite-driven process (elites in power and in opposition); in turn, Taiwan's elites –

political and intellectual – were the agents behind the development of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), reinforcing the paternal characteristic of the PSB ideal.

These elites were engaged in seemingly endless negotiations on public television and its relationship with the political process, an indication of their mounting commitment to pluralist behaviour; but they also focused on how they might preserve their bases of commercial and social power in a liberalised media environment. From this discussion of Taiwan's public television system, we can corroborate McCargo's (2002) observations. Close alliances between the media on the one hand, and government and/or business on the other in many parts of South East Asia once limited the role of the media as agents of political transformation, but continue to affect the media once the break with the existing order has been accomplished.

Civil Society versus Public Service Broadcasting

The 2000 presidential election and the peaceful transition of power from the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party) may have completed the transition to procedural democracy, but the consolidation phase has only just started.[1] In particular, movements within civil society are still evolving into active and coherent organisations[2] whose strength is predicated on the simultaneous existence of a public sphere that allows for debate and discussion on social and political issues (Gill, 2000). Therefore, civil society supports the idea that there should be a public television station that is free from political interference and commercial competition.

Such provision is viewed as a fundamental requirement for democratic citizenship, dialogue, and the formation of national identities (Garnham, 1997).

In Taiwan, public television has provided a legitimate institutional structure through which civil society may attempt to influence government, scrutinise and challenge its decisions, demonstrate the authority of the democratic culture, and thus facilitate the consolidation of democracy. There are precedents for public service television assuming such responsibilities. In Western Europe, for example, the belief in Public Service Broadcasting is most mature. John Keane's research describes how, in Western Europe, Public Service Broadcasting is a device

> for protecting citizens against the twin threats of totalitarian propaganda and the crass commercialism of market-driven programming and, thus, as devices essential to a system of representative government in which reasonable, informed public opinion plays a central mediating role between citizens and state institutions (Keane, 1993: 235).

Nevertheless, the realisation of the public service ideal in Taiwan has been traumatic, and during debates in the early 1990s, it seemed that any planned public television station would fall under government control. Indeed, the spirited resistance to the idea from many quarters threatened to jeopardise the project altogether. Apart from anything else, a consensus on definition proved elusive: just what is Public Service Broadcasting? Moreover, Taiwan's three main political parties at the time – the

KMT, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the New Party (a splinter of the KMT) – exploited the issue to pursue their own narrow agendas. Critics of the public television project disapproved of the way it seemed to contradict the very notion of media pluralism that the political opposition had demanded for forty years. They failed to realise, however, that such pluralism was not a panacea. In fact, evidence mounted to suggest that the new media had merely complicated Taiwan's media environment and encouraged greater, rather than less, political involvement and excessive commercial competition for ratings. For example, it is possible to argue that cable television (legalised in Taiwan only in 1993) challenges the belief that a media system supposedly open to all regardless of income facilitates democratic citizenship. Where commercial and cable television deliver programming only to the most profitable geographic areas, or those areas willing and able to pay for such provision, the public service ideal is designed to provide national programming (Scannel, 1989: 135–66).

Thus by the mid-1990s, a consensus emerged in Taiwan about an apparent need to develop a genuine 'public' television institution that might empower viewers and allow them to determine their own agenda, instead of depending on politicians and media producers to set it for them. Political and social elites are routinely asked to comment on the news, whereas private individuals stumble into the news because of a unique experience they may have had. Together with particular formats, such as the staged political debate, this kind of agenda setting affirms 'the power of the opinions of public persons and the powerlessness of the opinions of private persons'

(Scannel, 1989: 135–66). The illusion of popular participation is seen most clearly in the myriad call-in television shows that now fill Taiwan's schedules. One hour-long programme on TVBS, *quanmin kaijiang eryilingling* ('Everyone Talks at 21:00', ie. 9pm the time it is broadcast) refers to itself as a call-in show even though it gives its viewers only twenty seconds each in the last five minutes of the programme to deliver their opinions on the preceding discussion. This is neither the foundation of genuine debate nor the basis for authentic popular empowerment, but does demonstrate the power of political and social elites to dominate discussion (their debates fill the preceding fifty-five minutes airtime).

Ideally, Public Service Broadcasting should perform at least three functions:

- be a source of 'quality' cultural programming;
- promote pluralism and diversity; and
- act as society's 'Fourth Estate' (M. Rawnsley, 1998: 277).

However, a decade of campaigning in Taiwan ended in 1997 with a design for a Public Television Service (PTS) that would fulfil only the first two roles. Moreover, Taiwan's PTS Foundation declared its 2001 annual report that its mission is: (1) to produce a variety of high quality programmes, (2) to promote the development of society, (3) to enrich the experience of indigenous cultures, and (4) to increase international cultural exchanges (PTS, 2002: 14). In other words, Taiwan's Public Television Service has assumed responsibility for providing 'quality' cultural programming and promoting media pluralism, but has so far avoided the role of 'Fourth Estate'. This is the key to Public Service Broadcasting acting as a

'permanent thorn in the side of political power' and serving 'as the primary means of communication for citizens situated within a pluralistic society' (Keane, 1993: 238).

Free Market versus PSB

The concept of Public Service Broadcasting is rooted in a protracted debate that questions whether a free market or a regulated broadcasting system advantages media and audiences. The former protects the media from government interference, but may damage the quality of media output and replace government with corporate power.[3]

Public Service Broadcasting seeks to redress possible government and corporate influence, and helps to 'decommodify' the media (Keane, 1991: 118). PSB bestows upon civil society more power, but *without allowing government interference to grow as a consequence*. This is clearly an important provision, for public service television has been criticised for restraining free media and encouraging state interference. The funding of Public Service Broadcasting is an unmistakable weak-spot in the model because control over funding can endow governments with a powerful instrument of coercion over its activities.

To restore balance, most public service broadcasters have looked to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a possible model of organisation and finance (M. Rawnsley, 1998: 30–86).[4] The BBC is particularly attractive for critics of the commercial mass media who mourn the apparent deterioration of the 'public' sphere due to the prevalence of 'market forces' (Scannel, 1989: 135–66). Yet the history of

the BBC is characterised by the Corporation's efforts to resist government pressure to conform to a political conception of the station's role. Moreover, the BBC is frequently reminded that the financial support it receives via the licence fee is not a natural right, but is a privilege granted by the representatives of the British electorate (Negrine, 1994: 81–99). Besides, it is difficult to escape the paternalism that is inherent in the premise of Public Service Broadcasting: commercial television produces programmes that are 'bad' for you; the state knows best and is determined to give audiences what is in their best interests. In this way, the elitism of Public Service Broadcasting is a serious hindrance to its democratic utility.

The idea of balance conforms to Keane's 'general principle':

> Communications media should not be at the whim of 'market forces' but rather placed within a political and legal framework which specifies and enforces tough minimum safeguards in matters of ownership structures, regional scheduling, programme content and decision-making procedures (Keane, 1991: 154).

As the story of Taiwan's efforts to create a public television system recounts, building the operational frameworks for this 'general principle' is far from straightforward. The creation of a 'political and legal framework' must conquer many barriers, including the absence of ideological consensus among the political parties. A framework may also enact laws and regulations that contradict the interests

of those political and corporate interests who enjoy a stake in maintaining the present system. Perhaps most interesting from our perspective, the public on whose behalf the station was created were denied any opportunity to voice their suggestions or criticisms of the plan. Social, intellectual and political elites steered the future of Taiwan's television industry, thus dampening our enthusiasm for PSB as an instrument of popular emancipation. In other words, it is too easy to view Taiwan's flourishing Public Television Service as a success story, and thus overlook its tortuous progress from conception to reality.

State Control versus PSB: The Era of CPTV

With the creation in 1971 of the Chinese Television System (CTS), Taiwan's third commercial television station,[5] audiences witnessed a striking deterioration in programming quality that can be explained by political involvement in the industry and fierce competition between the three commercial stations for viewers.[6] Television merely served the political agenda of the KMT that did not require the implementation of Public Service Broadcasting. After all, the KMT's economic management of Taiwan had attracted western (American) support and supposedly offered a developmental model for mainland China that conflicted with the idea of state support for a non-commercial television system.

As stagnation took hold of Taiwan's television industry during the 1970s, a group of academic observers led by Taiwan's leading authority on the media, Professor Lee Chan, demanded the creation of a public television station to remedy

the problems inherent in the current system (Chang, 1992). They were ignored by a government that could not risk upsetting the powerful interest groups in control of the television industry that had close corporate ties to the KMT. Moreover, the government claimed a shortage of frequencies meant that a new station was not feasible. Restraint by higher authorities and national security were invoked:

> All broadcasting systems fall under government jurisdiction in at least one sense: any authorized use of the frequency spectrum for broadcasting must be licensed by the government as a condition of belonging to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a United Nations body that attempts to keep users of the spectrum from interfering with one another (Browne, 1989: 12).

The Executive Yuan claimed that the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Transport and Communications controlled the frequencies assigned to Taiwan by the ITU. Six frequencies had already been allocated to the three existing commercial networks – Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV), China Television Company (CTV) and Chinese Television System (CTS), and one was retained for use by the government (*Min Sheng Pao*, 7 March 1987). In addition, several frequencies that had been granted to Taiwan by the ITU for sole use by television stations were procured by the military and security systems; the Ministry of National Defense controlled a number of frequencies for their own use on the grounds of 'national security'. Precisely how many they did control remained classified information,

though it is clear that they exceeded requirements (Cheng *et al.*, 1993: 3–73). The government had the perfect excuse to reject demands for new television stations – there were simply no spare frequencies – and before it would release any, the government would have to be persuaded of the value of Public Service Broadcasting.

The difficulty lay in convincing the government that such a move would not compromise national security (a far from easy task in a political system of martial law based on the perception of a serious external threat from a major regional military power). Luckily, the advocates of PSB had a powerful ally in the Premier, Sun Yun-suan. In their publications and speeches, they demonstrated how such a system would strengthen the government's vision of the contribution that television might make to Taiwan's development by relating the issue to Premier Sun ideas of the democratic and enlightening function of communications media in Chinese society:

> In addition to the existing three commercial television companies, we should establish a public television station which shall operate without advertisements, and be responsible for providing social and educational programmes in order to fulfil the needs of national education and government policy (quoted in Cheng *et al*., 1993: 372).

Sun believed that television could fulfil particular social and educational obligations, but did not believe that the three commercial television channels had any value in

realising these aims. In 1982, Sun instructed the Government Information Office (GIO) to remedy the situation by looking into the possibility of establishing a public television system (Global Views Monthly Editorial, 1991: 60). Two years of endless committee meetings within the GIO followed, but finally the first transmission of a public service programme on terrestrial television coincided with Chiang Ching-kuo's presidential inauguration on 20 May 1984. The Premier's interest had clearly influenced Taiwan's intricate and often frustrating bureaucratic machinery demonstrating that elites, rather than civil society, would drive the development of Taiwan's television industry. The inaugural broadcast was hardly inspiring: *Let Us Read the Trimetrical Classics Together* was not destined to become a much loved and often repeated programme that was guaranteed to boost ratings figures. Nevertheless, its transmission on TTV was a landmark event in the history of Taiwan's media. Public Service Broadcasting had arrived (*Min Sheng Pao*, 17 May 1984).

Initially, the GIO was responsible for PSB programming, but the government suggested that control should move closer towards the public domain. However, it was soon apparent that this decision was designed more to placate intellectual opinion than create a genuine Public Service Broadcasting station. In 1986, responsibility was removed from the GIO and given to a private corporation, the Broadcast Development Fund (BDF), later becoming the Chinese Public Television or CPTV (*Min Sheng Pao*, 25 December 1986). However, the BDF was not all that 'private', and soon succumbed to political involvement and the impact of

overlapping hierarchies. Thus, the President of BDF was also the Director-General of the GIO, and his deputy was the BDF's Executive-Director. The President of the GIO's Domestic Department became the Director-General of CPTV, and his Deputy, Secretary, and the Presidents of the Programme and Executive Departments all came from either the GIO or the KMT's Department of Cultural Affairs (*Min Sheng Pao*, 2 February 1989; *China Times*, 17 December 1990). In short, the government was still in control: 50 percent of CPTV's financial resources originated in the GIO, with the other 50 percent obtained from a share of the commercial revenue earned by the three television stations (Lee, 1992).

Thus, we have discovered the reason behind scepticism towards the establishment of a public television station in the 1990s. The organisation of CPTV demonstrated that the KMT was adept in turning a seemingly 'independent' television organisation into yet another instrument of government. The method was familiar: create 'private' organisations and then staff them with either members of government or government appointments, thus maintaining the patron-client networks that gave the KMT its strength. It is hardly surprising that CPTV did nothing to stem the growing tide of popular cynicism throughout the 1990s, and merely reinforced demands for a *genuine* public television station.

The programmes made by CPTV were designed to fulfil the educational and cultural responsibilities that Premier Sun had envisaged.[7] CPTV struggled to compete with the three commercial stations, but it did acquire a following among the urban educated younger generation, allowing the station to target its programming

towards young professionals who played a significant role in the political, cultural and economic life of Taiwan (Chu, 1987). This was dependent on CPTV producing a number of high quality programmes and offering more viewing choice for minorities (defined as children, teenagers, and intellectuals) who were largely ignored by the ratings-driven commercial channels.

Nevertheless, CPTV was still criticised for ignoring the subjects that the public were thought to be really concerned about, and for avoiding sensitive topics. For example, in 1988 the station produced a pioneering series of programmes on sex education, *The Beginning of Human Beings*, but the production team decided to skirt those themes that might offend the morality of the viewing public. As a result, the programmes that were transmitted were described as no better than a standard high-school textbook (*United Daily News*, 5 September 1988). Public affairs programming fared little better because they were often considered too pro-government. Any attempt to be critical fell foul of the government and often resulted in censorship. The GIO withdrew one of the episodes in the 1990 series, *Dialogue Between Wind and Grass*, because it 'exposed the problems relating to poverty and crime' (*Min Sheng Pao*, 8 July 1990). It is not surprising that CPTV's programmes were often dismissed as 'cheap propaganda' that was not restrained by the 'hidden hand' of market forces. Viewers also wondered why CPTV spent so much money on producing dramas based on the ancient classics and avoided stories that focused on modern Taiwan. For example in November 1991, CPTV invested more than NT$17 million (U.S.$500,000) on a ten-hours long series of documentaries about *The*

History of China (designed to compete with the PRC's influential TV series, *River Elegy*).[8] At the same time, CPTV was willing to spend a mere fraction of the cost – NT$2.3 million (U.S.$68,000) – on a six and a half hours documentary series, *Light in the Society*, that discussed the character of Taiwanese society (Lin, 1991: 65–8; Cheng *et al*., 1993: 347–9).

In a twist of irony, these programming disasters were not the reason for a growth in demand for a genuinely public television system. Instead, it was CPTV's sub-standard financial base that caused a rethink. To understand this, it is important to note that CPTV was not technically a station at all: instead of transmitting its own programmes that it produced in-house, CPTV had to requisition airtime on the three commercial channels. This meant that its programmes were often in competition with each other if they were shown simultaneously on more than one channel, a situation that did not make strategic or financial sense. In 1987, Premier Yu Kuo-hwa agreed in principle that Taiwan needed a public television station, and so once again, the GIO entered into a round of prolonged negotiations with other government departments for finance, land and frequencies (*Min Sheng Pao*, 7 March and 12 September 1987; *China Times*, 26 August 1987).

In 1985, the GIO had turned to the problem of opening scarce frequencies. It tried to persuade the Ministry of Defense to free some of its frequencies, a move that was clearly preferable to requisitioning any of the existing commercial stations. The Ministry of Defense protested, claiming that the release of its frequencies would jeopardize Taiwan's fragile security (*Min Sheng Pao*, 7 March 1987). In fact, the

military presented the most obstinate and powerful resistance to the creation of a PSB television station until the government finally lifted martial law in 1987, and always invoked 'national security' as justification for their defiance.

However, even the military could not resist the force of democratisation, especially when the PSB project received high-level support from the state President (Lee Teng-hui) and Premier (Hau Pei-tsun). Buckling under political pressure, the Ministry of Defense relented and agreed to release four frequencies for use by a future PSB station (*Min Sheng Pao*, 24 May and 3 October 1989). At the beginning of 1991, the new Director-General of the GIO, Shaw Yu-ming, announced that a new public service television channel, supervised by a politically neutral committee, would soon begin broadcasting across the island (*Independent Evening Post*, 15 February 1990). Yet potential viewers were dismayed to discover that when it referred to the creation of a public service television station, the government actually meant expanding CPTV. The quality of CPTV programming had not impressed audiences; neither had its personnel structure and the way it was financed, all of which seemed at variance with the kind of system that would nurture the growth of a new civil society in a democratic Taiwan. Interested opinion insisted, therefore, that CPTV move away from GIO control and emerge as a new, innovative, and above all *completely independent* television station. In the climate of political reform, the government hastily abandoned plans to reorganise CPTV as a miniature GIO and instead created the Public Television Organising Committee (PTOC).

The Creation of PTOC

The creation of the PTOC coincided with the expansion of an active civil society in an increasingly democratic Taiwan. In the myriad debates over the future of television, however, intellectual elites led civil society in exerting pressure on the government to appoint the committee. Moreover, these elites pressured the government into making sure the organisation, procedures and membership of the PTOC were completely transparent. While the battle of wills between academics interested in pursuing a BBC-style public broadcasting system and the government's attempts to maintain its control through manipulation and secrecy ended (*China Times Express*, 5–9 June 1990), the power of public opinion to influence the direction of broadcasting remained severely limited. The public was denied a say in the development of its own television station.

The membership of PTOC indicated a major break with precedent: although the older generation of academics still dominated the committee, they were no longer involved in political parties (though the majority did support the KMT). They were accomplished members of their own fields with considerable public standing. With PTOC in place, Shaw Yu-ming, Director-General of the GIO, announced in 1990 that a public television station would begin transmitting in three years (*Central Daily News*, 14 June 1990). Moreover, sweeping political and social changes persuaded the government to adopt a more liberal attitude towards the media, mobilising KMT members of Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan, to approve the PTOC's

budget in the 1992 session provided two crucial conditions were met. These were: (1) the members of the committees that would supervise both the PTOC and the envisaged public television station must be completely independent of the political parties (a radical departure from practice); and (2) the PTOC should facilitate popular involvement in the project.

However, observers soon realised that Public Service Broadcasting would not magically resolve all the media's problems: in fact, the cost of quality was staggering – possibly *greater* political involvement. Without support from the type of licensing system that finances the BBC – guaranteed funding via taxation – it seemed inevitable that the station would be funded completely by the government. Did this imply that the government would be able to exercise control over the day-to-day work of the station? Would 'public television' simply become yet another government property? Could the station establish the mechanisms and institutional checks required to monitor itself without government interference? In Taiwan, these issues and their implications became the source of renewed political conflict between government, opposition and the burgeoning civil society.

Particularly serious was the divergence between the type of programmes that PTOC planned to produce and what the audience expected. For example in 1993, PTOC devoted its resources to producing four documentary series: *Hong Kong, 1997*; *The Changes in the USSR*; *The European Community*; and *Chinese Abroad: Chinese People's Stories* (PTOC, 1993). None of its output addressed Taiwan's experience of social and political change. To explain this many observers alluded to

what is termed the 'cultural bribery' theory (Cheng *et al.*, 1993: 341). This describes how intellectual challenges to the social system are met by promises to deliver cultural programmes that will appeal to the intellectual elite, thus ultimately alienating the majority of viewers. The choice of programming indicated that the conflict between public demand, intellectual paternalism and government control was unlikely to abate. Critics also complained that Taiwan's media environment was particularly vulnerable to challenges arising from the revolution in international information flows that seemed to suggest the emergence of a mass global culture. PSB was championed as a way of defending Taiwan's culture and national identity against the onslaught of foreign produce. Understandably, problems cropped up in trying to define 'national identity', an issue saddled with bitter political, historical, and ideological baggage: Is Taiwan's identity Chinese or Taiwanese? And what is 'Taiwanese' anyway? Should PSB provide more non-Han[9] programming, or would dialect programming[10] actually divide society even further? By producing panel discussions and call-in shows the PTOC encouraged popular participation; and it planned to divide its news output into regional and international divisions, thus demonstrating that positive centrifugal processes were at work. This meant news would no longer only happen in Taipei, Taiwan's capital city. Wang Hsiao-Hsiang, Secretary-General of the PTOC, promised that regional news would 'concentrate on local politics, economics, and cultural developments ...'.[11] With the public invited to comment on the first draft of the Public Television Act in 1991, it became clear that the organisation and planned output of PTOC were helping to nurture a vibrant and

localised civil society that would now have a platform for expressing its opinions on a wide range of issues. The people of Taiwan were fast becoming recognised as 'citizens' with a responsibility for the progress of democratic Taiwan.

Over the next two years, the Public Television Act was repeatedly amended and redrafted in a concerted effort to satisfy all parties. Inevitably, such good intentions gave way to the kind of institutional paralysis that critics of pluralism lament; and while the creation of the station was delayed yet again, civil society became a more coherent force. One example was the 'People's Public Television Organising Committee' that brought together scholars and students of journalism and communication from around Taiwan to present their own ideas and demands for the new station (in other words, another elite-driven organisation). They shared their opinions with the KMT's political opponents, so that once again media issues became politicised.[12] When all the members of the government resigned from the PTOC, intellectual opinion celebrated a minor triumph (*China Times*, 16–19 March 1993). Although an isolated event, this strengthened the conviction that a genuinely 'public sphere' with a public television station could and even might be created in the future, provided further democratisation strengthened popular power. When it seemed likely that the project would be delayed indefinitely, public outrage guaranteed that the Public Television Act was finally passed on its third reading in the Legislative Yuan on 31 May 1997. As a transitional organisation, PTOC was dissolved once its mission was accomplished, and Taiwan's Public Television Service began broadcasting on 1 July 1998. The new station is supervised by an

independent PTS Foundation, and is prohibited from making or broadcasting news. However, PTOC's original proposals for providing regional news offered a model for other television channels which now tailor their news output for particular geographic audiences.

Politics versus Civil Society

> 'Public service broadcasting is driven by higher aspirations than solely to provide entertainment. Public service broadcasting is the attempt to make quality popular programmes. It does justice to human experience. … It adds to the quality of people's lives. …'
>
> – Keane (1991: 117)[13]

The story of how Taiwan designed and assembled public television is testimony to the expanding power of a civil society that is able to check and balance the political system. Nevertheless, we should not overstate its influence, since the protracted – and sometimes tortuous – negotiations created a Public Television Act that was a compromise of the demands of all involved. The GIO remains responsible for the station; none of the commercial television stations are obliged to contribute to the operational costs; and once government funding ends, the station will have to be self-sufficient to survive.[14] The negotiated settlement satisfied everybody and nobody.

Nevertheless, the process did demonstrate to the participants that democracy requires discussion and negotiation, and that political balance between the parties is possible. Most importantly, Taiwan's civil society learned that it could participate in the decision-making processes. In this way, the chronicle of Public Service Broadcasting in Taiwan parallels the remarkable political and social transformation of the 1980s and the 1990s. In television as in politics, the party-state remained the dominant actor until it could no longer afford to ignore the power of civil society. The caveat, of course, is that social and intellectual elites dominated the debates on the future direction of broadcasting, believing that they had the paternal power to speak on behalf of public opinion. In turn, public opinion was denied any genuine opportunity to discuss the formation of *public* television.

Prior to the 1990s, the three major television stations – TTV, CTV, and CTS – served the political and financial agenda of the KMT. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that the government did not want to disrupt the status quo. Even though the government could spend in 1985 around U.S.$11.5 million (c.NT$395 million) on creating an independent public service station, it decided instead to devote one-fifth of the budget to establish the less public-oriented CPTV. Although CPTV was ostensibly a 'public service' provider, the organisation was actually little more than a vehicle of government propaganda. This was a missed opportunity; the conservative agenda forced on CPTV meant that it was unable to document the remarkable transformation of Taiwan in the final two decades of the twentieth century. Instead,

CPTV demonstrated that the government was more concerned with pursuing its own narrow political interests than the needs of Taiwan's media environment.

The new social and political climate that engulfed Taiwan at the end of the 1980s pressured the government in 1992 to suddenly spend around U.S.$164 million (c.$NT6 billion) on establishing a new public television station. In the rush, an organisation was created that was less than ideal – PTOC – and plans to establish a PSB station were postponed several times during the process. How might we explain such incompetence? After all, the KMT had cultivated a deserved reputation for efficient state management of the free market economy, turning Taiwan (with American assistance) into an Asian economic powerhouse. The problem, of course, is that 'efficiency' does not necessarily meet the needs of the public in a genuine democracy. The KMT defined the needs of the public, a management strategy that corresponded to the way government permeated all sectors of society in Taiwan.

Further inefficiency was therefore unavoidable. In its brief life, PTOC struggled because audiences, led by interested intellectual elites, resented the continued absence of a genuinely public television station and because the government chose to pursue it own political interests. This is why the battle continued through 2000 even though the Public Television Act was passed in 1997 and the Public Television Service began to broadcast in 1998. Self-organised autonomous bodies, still dominated by the academic community, have assumed responsibility for monitoring television in Taiwan; one such a group, Union of Democratising Non-Cable Television, led by Professor Fang Chien-San has pressed

repeatedly for the creation of more public television stations.[15] It is still too early to speculate about the consequences these campaigns will have; but in a democratic society, the more that these groups can encourage genuine public involvement with broadcasting, the more powerful becomes the public service broadcaster to resist overt political involvement. It is important to recognise that 'efficiency' is not a panacea; creating a genuine PSB system will take time, especially one that aspires to empower its citizens to participate in a plural democratic system that encourages autonomous and self-organising civil societies (Keane, 1991: 126).

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Notes

[1] Samuel Huntington (1991: 266–7) describes consolidation as acceptance and routinisation of power from one party to another. The violence that occurred on the streets of Taipei following the 2000 Presidential election was directed at the KMT for having lost power; it was not designed to protest the result of the election. We can therefore conclude that Taiwan (including the military) accepted the result of the election, even though a significant number of voters (in fact, more than half of the electorate) were not happy with it. The legal challenge initiated by the KMT and People's First Party against the 2004 election result (in which Chen Shui-bian remained president with a mere 0.2 percent majority) demonstrates the vulnerability of consolidating political systems.

[2] As of April 2000 there were 3,435 'civic organisations' in Taiwan. See: <gio.gov.tw/info/98html/stat-e.htm>.

[3] The debate has been particularly spirited in the United States. See Kelley and Donway (1990), Holmes (1990), and Stepp (1990). Their ideas have also found champions on the other side of the Atlantic, where the British Broadcasting Corporation continues to defy the sanctity of commercial broadcasting. In particular, see Veljanovski (1989).

[4] The BBC is financed through a non-competitive system of funding. The BBC receives the whole of the compulsory licence fee levied on the mere possession of a television set.

[5] The other stations were the Taiwan Television Company (TTV) and China Television Company (CTV). Along with CTS, these stations were owned by the government, the KMT and the military (ie, the KMT-controlled party-state).

[6] However, this was not the kind of competition that is associated with pure market-forces. The television market was distorted by political control of the three stations were owned or controlled by the various agencies of the state.

[7] According to Fang Chien-San, the CPTV spent an estimated NT$200 million (around £4 million) between 1986 and 1993, providing more than 5,000 hours of programmes (including those purchased from abroad and co-produced with domestic production companies). However, we cannot verify these figures because, just like its commercial counterparts, CPTV did not reveal any official data (Cheng *et al.,* 1993:

347 & 388). In contrast, CPTV has published a greater number of research papers about programming and audience analysis.

[8] 'Written and produced by six intellectuals ... *River Elegy* was broadcast by the Chinese national television network in June 1988. It immediately caught fire, in terms of both popularity and controversy. The "River Elegy" reformists, in powerfully emotional words, called for the total refutation and rejection of traditional conservative authoritarian Chinese culture ...' (Chiou, 1995: 52–7). *River Elegy* was then banned.

[9] Han is the dominant nation among the Chinese – over 90 percent of Chinese are Han people. The six major non-Han minorities in China are Manchus, Mongols, Uighurs, Tibetans, Miaos, and Yaos (Gernet, 1996: 3–13). In Taiwan, over 98 percent of the population also come from the Han Chinese. But there are also aborigines and an increasing number of foreign labourers.

[10] According to an official population investigation in 1990, there were 73 percent of people in Taiwan whose mother tongue was Taiwanese, 12 percent Hakka, 13 percent other dialects from Mainland China, and 1.7 percent aborigines (Cheng *et al.*, 1993: 223).

[11] Interviews with Mr. Hsiao-Hsiang Wang, Taipei, February 1995.

[12] Interviews with Dr. Chung-Gen Chang (Taipei, December 1993), Mr. Dai-Hung Tseng (Taipei, December 1993), Dr. Chien-San Fang (Taipei, January 1995), and Dr. Fu Hu (Taipei, April 1996).

[13] Keane here cites an interview with Jonathan Powell, former controller of BBC1, 2 November 1989.

[14] According to the original Public Television Act passed in 1997, the annual government grant to PTS should be decreased by 10 percent each year. However, since the change of government in 2000, the new Executive Yuan passed an amendment after third reading on 4 October 2001, which has dictated that the decrease shall stop after the third accounting year. In other words, starting 2002, the government grant to PTS will be maintained at U.S.$26,239,067 (PTS, 2002: 10).

[15] The Union of Democratising Non-Cable Television demanded that TTV and CTS must be re-organised and become public stations. This is part of their effort in reforming the national television industry in Taiwan (Center for Media Literacy, 2002; *United Daily News,* 11–16 October 2002).