

Moving from State to Public Service Broadcasting

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The transformation of broadcasting is usually linked to major political upheaval, but not always. We had a wave of transformation of state broadcasters into public service ones in the years after the Berlin wall came down in 1989, and communism was abandoned in most of Central and Eastern Europe. We are heading for another wave of such transformations in North Africa and the Middle East as Tunisia and Egypt lead the way in attempts to become democratic societies. These are the dramatic changes, but there are also windows of opportunity in stable states when broadcasting can be transformed - if it becomes a major political issue with the support of the public behind it. I plan to look at some of the major movements first and then to look at how transformation can be helped along even in stable states.

First the Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Two models were competing – the commercial US model, which is essentially a free for all, with a small presence for PSBs financed by some Government grants but mostly by sponsorship and fund-raising by the stations. And the European model, for autonomous, self-standing PSBs, funded by the taxpayer, or the license-fee payer, with some protection for European content. The US model was promoted by the USA, the World Trade organisation and to some extent by the Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development.¹ The European model was required by the EU and the Council of Europe as a condition of membership. Many of the Central and Eastern European countries who were transforming their constitutions towards democratic models were keen to have both membership of the EU and the WTO, so broadcasting policy was for them like walking along a dividing tightrope, trying to meet the requirements of both. For example, the Baltic States' membership of the WTO was originally opposed by the USA on the issue of audiovisual markets but they managed to join it in 1999-2001. Poland experienced similar difficulties, but eventually all the accession states managed to join the WTO, despite moving towards the EU model of broadcasting.

This model was defined in various EU Directives. In 1989 there was the Television without Frontiers Directive, requiring the free flow of programmes within the EU and protecting European content. In 2003 the European Parliament defined the broad terms for membership of the EU, requiring applicants to take on the previously agreed EU legislation which made up the “acquis communautaire”. There was also

¹ Hedwig de Smaele “Audiovisual Europe: the many faces of Europeanization”, within “Media in the Enlarged Europe”, edited by Alec Charles, 2009

the requirement that organisations joining the EBU should be PSBs, rather than commercial broadcasters. The European Broadcasting Union also developed a Model Law which it offered to the accession countries to help with the reorganisation of their broadcasting.

EU negotiations over audiovisual policy opened in late '98 with the Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia, Poland and Hungary and two years later with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic and Romania. They closed in 2002 with all Central and Eastern European countries except for Bulgaria and Romania with whom they were provisionally closed. So countries aspiring to join the EU had little choice in the broadcasting systems they adopted – they were forced into the European PSB model by EU requirements. As the years have passed, the broadcasting systems in East and Central Europe have been transformed out of all recognition, and now offer pluralist broadcasting and independence from excessive state pressure. Of course there are variations, with some performing better than others. Looking more widely at the post-Communist transformation, and going wider than just the EU, Charles Gati² summarises the progress by saying the ones doing best are those where democratic reforms are doing well, and singles out the Leaders as the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Doing less well are what he calls the Laggards of the semi-authoritarian regimes of Slovakia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus. And then there are what he calls the Losers in the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia and the TransCaucasus.

However, even in the most successful group, there are still perceptions in some of the countries that the PSB is still the Government station. There is a reluctance to believe that they are really free of Government control. As Janis Juzefovics, a PhD researcher at London's Westminster University, formerly a news reporter then producer with Radio Latvia, puts it: "Today in Latvia we de jure have public service radio and television that is still state-funded (all attempts to introduce licence fees have failed). However public broadcasters are not directly state-controlled. From time to time there have been reports on political elite attempting to exercise implicit control over the editorial decisions of public broadcasters, and managers of PSBs have admitted that, due to the fact that politicians take decision on the volume of annual state subsidies, public broadcasters are forced to be obedient to those having political power." He goes on to argue that the constitutional position of the PSB, and the reality, are not completely in line. Formally Latvia has PSB but it is not functioning properly. The staff in the PSBs, he says, are not generally of the highest quality. In the PSBs there is self-censorship and those appointed tend to be the 'obedient' ones. In the transition from Communism, the PSBs were built on the old state broadcasters, rather than set up anew. In my view this is not the most successful model to follow. In Latvia, the best Current Affairs programme which translates as "Nothing Personal" is on the commercially funded TV3, and audiences to the PSBs are low and declining. All the previous research on PSBs in post-Communist societies has focused on structural development and Janis Jusefovicz argues that there is a need for empirical enquiry to explore how public broadcasters

² Charles Gati, "East European Media", 1996

are perceived by audiences. His view is that, due to the political interference in the PSBs, audiences continue to perceive public broadcasters as a part of state apparatus, as it was during the Communist rule. For example, he says, in Poland and Hungary licence fee payments have been implemented, but audiences are reluctant to pay for public broadcasters and the majority evades licence fee payments.

Leaving Latvia, and looking more closely at Hungary, this year there have been attempts to modify media laws. This has brought widespread criticism and led to modifications of the original proposals - but not sufficiently to satisfy Article 19.³ Or indeed the EU. Article 19 argues that the following measures are essential: regulatory control should be limited over broadcasting media only, and the media regulatory body and public media should be independent from the government. In addition, the framework of right to protect journalistic sources should be revised in line with international standards and the high fines for infringement of the media laws should be reduced. So even where a country adopted media laws which put them into the category of “Leaders” in introducing a free media, as defined by Charles Gati, this progress may now be threatened. The European Parliament, too, has just called for further changes in Hungarian media laws. A resolution has been adopted calling on the Hungarian authorities to repeal and not apply the laws or its provisions that are “found to be incompatible with the letter or spirit” of EU laws and other European conventions. The European Parliament has called on the Hungarian authorities to restore the independence of media governance and to stop state interference with freedom of expression and their insistence on “balanced coverage”. “Over-regulation of media is counterproductive to the existence of an effective pluralism in the public sphere”, says the resolution.

MEPs also pointed out that “media pluralism and freedom continues to be a grave concern in the EU and its Member States, notably in Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic and Estonia”. They ask the Commission to propose a directive on media freedom, pluralism and independent governance before the end of this year.

In another post-Communist society, Mongolia, however, the transition is still developing in a positive way. A new law on press freedom in 1998 paved the way for media reforms. As part of those reforms, some of Mongolia’s media professionals and practitioners called for creating a public service broadcaster. A team of media professionals and several Members of Parliament travelled to European countries like Sweden and Germany to study the legal environment for PSB. Consequently, the state-run National Radio and Television, MNB, became the Public Service Broadcaster following the enactment of the Law on Public Radio and Television on 1

³ Amnesty statement 1.3.11 <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/reports/hungary-article-19-calls-for-comprehensive-media-law-reform.pdf>

July, 2005. As the DG of MNB, Naranbaatar Myanganbuu puts it⁴: “We faced many difficulties to get to where we are today. The biggest challenge for us was the lack of PSB awareness among decision makers and more importantly among public. The main funding comes from the state budget, so the government constantly questions the need for PSB. Commercial and private broadcasters add their pressure by taking away any opportunity for running advertisements on MNB which makes us dependent on state funding and license fee. The state funding made the public doubt in our credibility and impartiality. To gain the public’s trust we had to raise awareness among our own staff who were as confused as anyone else.”

Since becoming a PSB in 2005 MNB has had to constantly lobby for its survival, raising awareness among its audience and public. However, today the situation has got much better and the state as well as the public understands the importance of having PSB. As the DG of the PSB there puts it: “MNB has gained public trust as the most trusted source of information. We are not yet a full PSB but we are getting there. “

There is at least one exception, however, to the link between democratic development and the introduction of PSB. This is in Thailand, where PSB was introduced under a military government. It came into being because of strong pressure by civil society groups and media pressure. Thai PSB was set up in January 2008 as a commercial-free broadcaster with editorial independence. It is financed by taxes on tobacco and alcohol – the so-called Sin Tax. It has an elected Board of Governors, with 4-year terms and it works closely with a 50-member Audience Council. The extraordinary thing is that the decision to pass the legislation came from a military-installed government and national assembly. Earlier, before the military coup in 2006, the elected government headed by Thaksin Shinawatt failed to pass a bill to free all media from government and military control, despite an overwhelming majority in the House. So the thinking in Thailand is that it needed a 'bureaucratic' rather than a political government to pass such a law.

Article 19, in a recent study of the media in Thailand⁵ “Report on Declining Freedom of Expression in Thailand for Universal Periodic Review” acknowledges that the 2007 Constitution prevents politicians from owning or holding shares in the mass media, and the existence of an independent media regulator, but criticises the recognition of rights, for the army and state agencies, over the media, guaranteed in the Broadcasting Act of 2008.

The current difficulties for PSB in Thailand, according to Somchai Suwanban,⁶ Board member of Thai Public Broadcasting Service, are “how to change the mindset and working process among our journalists and programme makers who are so used to commercial media cultures. They are used to 'serving those in power, or those who have got money, rather than serving 'public interests'.” He believes that the

⁴ E-mail interview with Elizabeth Smith 25.2.2011

⁵ <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/submissions/thailand-upr-submission.pdf> published 15.3.11

⁶ E-mail interview with Elizabeth Smith 21.2.11

legislation provides enough guarantee for them to be independent, free from political and economic interference. They have sufficient funding at least for next three years before they could start a negotiation process to raise the upper limit of public funding. They do not, however, feel they are yet a full PSB, and will not be one until the majority of the staff have a 'public service consciousness'.

The experience of decisions by the military government in Thailand may be relevant when we look at the transformations ahead in the Middle East. It is unlikely that, when changes take place in the Middle Eastern countries affected by the "Arab Spring", there will be pressures comparable to those imposed by the EU and the EBU on the broadcasters of East and Central Europe. The Arab League has nothing like the strength or cohesiveness of the EU. Its effectiveness has been hampered by divisions among its member states. There have been hostilities between traditional monarchies - such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco - and the republics, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. And attitudes towards the Iraq war were divided. So, developments are likely to differ totally from state to state. On the European analogy, however, progress is likely to be greatest when the transformation towards democracy is most successful. On the analogy of Thailand, there may even be progress under a military government - particularly, perhaps, if it is an interim one.

Looking more closely at Egypt, the consensus among the protesters – the victorious majority - is that very major changes in the media are urgently required. The difficulties ahead will be to see that they are achieved. While the demonstrations were in progress, we witnessed the extraordinary use of new social media, bypassing the irrelevant state media, and – despite government attempts to cut it off – it had a huge impact. Nailah Hamdy, Journalism Professor at the American University of Cairo, told me⁷ she believes: "It is far too late to transform the government media. State-media as it exists today, has been struggling to keep up with choices from satellite television in the past decade. In the past four years or so, great efforts were made toward transforming the government media to compete for audience attention. But then came the revolution and their complete denial of events." As Egypt evolves and moves along a path of political reform, the media must be reformed. This call has been made the protestors at Tahrir Square, by politicians, media scholars and the general public. I see a future where a public service broadcaster must emerge. There are many models that may work for Egypt but Nailah Hamdy thinks that a BBC-style organisation will emerge as the alternative to state-owned media. "I believe that a new Government will set a high priority to changing the structure that we currently have."

Others in the media in Egypt are also driving for change. Shahira Amin , former Deputy Head of the state-run Nile TV News channel, is quoted⁸ in the UK's Guardian newspaper, as saying that she will deliver a list of proposed media reforms to the Military 's representatives in Maspero, the state broadcasting HQ. And Mervat Ali Kaffas, Head of Nile TV, says in the same

⁷ Interview by Elizabeth Smith with Professor Nail Hamdy by e-mail on 21.2.2011

⁸ "Egypt: the next generation" by Jack Shenkar The Guardian 21,2,11

article “After the next elections, I don’t think you’ll find a Ministry of Information in Egypt. It’s not compatible with a genuinely free democracy”. So the will for change is there, but we shall have to watch with interest to see how much real progress is made in the next few years. A lot will depend on the quality of outside advice which the post-election government of Egypt turns to, and which countries it comes from.

An earlier major transformation occurred in South Africa in 1994-6, in circumstances of radical political change, when the white-dominated state broadcaster, SABC, was successfully transformed into a full PSB. There was considerable help and advice on the appropriate new constitution from overseas consultants, including from the then Secretary-General of the CBA (Commonwealth Broadcasting Association), Stuart Revill, who spent some months working with SABC. Excellent structures were set up, many more African languages were introduced and it was regarded as a flagship for the new democracy. By 2003, however, there was a widespread view that the organisation was suffering from too close a relationship with the party of Government, the ANC. It became embroiled in successive disputes between Group Chief Executives and the SABC Board, and this led to low morale and difficulties in living up to the high aspirations of the 1996 commitment to PSB.

In 2007, Tanzania set out to transform its state broadcaster TBS into a full PSB. The Government appointed a journalist with impeccable credentials for independence as DG. This was a former Head of the BBC’s Swahili Service, Tido Mhando. In March 2008, a special big launch ceremony for the renamed TBC was held. The President declared that from that day TBC was heading towards becoming a full Public Broadcaster. As Tido Mhando puts it⁹: We started programmes of open discussions with people of all walks of life taking part, including politicians from the opposition parties. We invited those holding public positions to answer public queries. Our news programmes became fair and impartial to the amazement of many but we started being trusted and admired by the public and in a very short period TBC became a number one broadcaster in the country from being earlier a dull un-admired broadcasting network. We introduced programmes for every group of society and went into new technology. We were also lucky to sign a five year contract with the BBC World Service Trust which would assist in training programmes as well as helping in the facilitation of modern equipment. Indeed it started to be working through very slowly. Just a few months ago, one popular newspaper columnist wrote in praise of the changes, saying he never thought he would live to see a true PSB in Tanzania - something that was happening now.”

However, as the election at the end of 2010 approached, things became more difficult. As usual the ruling party, CCM was pushing for TBCs favour. But TBC

⁹ Interview by Elizabeth Smith with Tido Mhando, former DG Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation

wanted to be seen to be fair to every political party and every politician and also to help the people in making that right choices for the right people to rule for the coming five years. In the end, the ruling party, which had been in power since 1961, performed very poorly, winning with a very small margin. They blamed the TBC and the contract for Tido Mhando came to a sudden end. There was considerable dismay. The election reports by most of the observer groups, including that of the European Union, had praised TBC as the only Tanzania media to have done really well. So this was a setback in TBC's progress towards full PSB statues. By not continuing with Tido Mhando, a message has been sent to future DGs on how DGs are expected to behave at elections. It is also unfortunate that not all the necessary legislation for the transformation is yet in place. TBC still reports to and receives orders from the Minister of Information just as in the past. After the formation of the new government, the new Minister looks set to make sure that TBC abides by what the government wants. A lot could depend, however, on who is appointed the next DG, so we have to watch developments there with interest.

At the opposite end of the democratic spectrum in Africa, Zimbabwe continues with an un-reconstructed state monopoly broadcaster, ZBC. Despite a small amount of political progress through the Global Political Agreement, which brought the Opposition Leader Morgan Tsangvirai into the Government as Prime Minister, no progress at all has been made towards making ZBC into a full PSB. Despite the efforts of Morgan Tsangvirai, the broadcasting scene remains heavily biased towards President Mugabe. The latest oppressive measure came on 19 February when a group of pro-democracy activists in Zimbabwe were arrested for attending a peaceful and legal meeting to watch video footage of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia.. Forty-five of them have now been formally charged, either with treason or with attempting to overthrow the government by unconstitutional means. In Zimbabwe, conviction for treason under section 20 of the Criminal Law Act carries a penalty of life in prison or death. As Zimbabwe's Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai, put it¹⁰: "I find it despicable that people would be arrested for watching videos of happenings elsewhere in the world, videos of events already in the public domain...I still believe that, if SADC, fellow African countries and the international community, show the right will and commitment to Zimbabwe we can secure freedom here too, and do so peacefully." Well let us hope so. Nowhere is a free media needed more than in Zimbabwe.

A sad example from the Pacific is Fiji TV, set up, with advice from the UK's Thomson Foundation, in 1966 as a commercially-funded PSB. The 2006 coup there, however, and subsequent crackdown by the military Government – including a brief occupation of their building by the military - has put its management, despite heroic efforts, under severe pressure. The Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, which is the radio state broadcaster, has even less independence from the Government.

A country which was in turmoil four years ago, and is now struggling to transform its state broadcasters into PSB, is Nepal. During the People's Movement, the state

¹⁰ <http://nehandaradio.com/2011/03/02/full-text-of-statement-by-pm-tsvangirai/>

broadcasters, Radio Nepal and Nepal TV, were broadcasting in favour of the ruling monarch. After the success of the People's Movement, the new government formed a high level commission to look into the state media. It recommended the government to transform the state media into a PSB. However, because of the instability in the government, recommendations are not yet implemented, but, according to Tapanath Shukla¹¹, Executive Director Radio Nepal, the need for PSB is felt in all levels of policy making bodies. In late 2010, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Nepali Ministry of Information and Communication, the Japan overseas cooperation agency (JICA) and Radio Nepal to formulate communication policy, law and other legal provisions to transform Radio Nepal into a PSB. The project is on course, with support from the present government.

There have also been very major changes in broadcasting in Indonesia in the past decade. As a result of a political reform movement in 1998, the ministry of information was dissolved and the state broadcaster, RRI, changed its status into a government-owned company under the ministry of finance. Following the promulgation of the Broadcasting Law in 2002, RRI was transformed into a public service broadcasting (PSB), which is independent, neutral and non commercial, and whose sole function is to serve the public interest. Under the broadcasting law, RRI is no longer a government radio, though it is funded by the government with the Parliament's approval. As stipulated in the broadcasting law, no intervention in RRI editorial policy by whoever is allowed. In addition to RRI as the sole PSB, there are some 2,000 commercial radio stations and about 6,000 community radio stations.

An outsider, Parni Hadi, was the first non civil servant elected President/Director of RRI in 2005 for a period of five years. He had never worked in a radio station before, except as free lance contributor, resource person/host/moderator. As he put it¹²: "Being a career journalist with almost 40 years of experience at different publications, I started improvements in the program, especially the editorial policy. I challenged RRI reporters and editors to have the courage to be critical to the government by applying fair, independent and balanced reporting for the sake of the public interests. We invited critical public figures, including opponents, to speak in RRI, in addition to applying citizen journalism. Now the President of the Republic, cabinet ministers, Parliamentarians, public figures and opposition leaders are more than willing to "listen to and speak through RRI". I think the transformation of the mindset of civil servants to be professional broadcasters and the increasing public trust are the most fundamental changes and achievements."

Interestingly, it is felt in Indonesia that the RRI is no longer a government radio, According to the law, RRI is under the direct command of the President, but as the Head of State, not as the Head of Government. Says Parni Hadi: "We differentiate the legal status of a government radio and a state radio." According to the statute, RRI is a state radio, because it was established by the state. But it must be independent, neutral, non commercial and with a sole purpose of serving the public

¹¹ Tapanath Shukla¹¹, Executive Director Radio Nepal, e-mail Interview with Elizabeth Smith 22.2.11

¹² Email interview with Elizabeth Smith 21.2.11

interests (not just the government interests).

For the future, Parni Hadi thinks that with strong public support, especially from Indonesian NGOs, and increasing awareness and confidence of the employees, RRI could overcome any attempt by the ruling powers to regain control over RRI. The present RRI management is now trying very hard to revise the broadcasting law with the purpose of strengthening RRI status as an independent institution in financial and personnel management without any interference of related government agencies, except for the sake of good corporate governance. Under the present law and regulations, RRI's funding is still part of the ministry finance's budget and its personnel management must follow policies adopted by the Board of Civil Servants. However, the revision of the broadcasting law is expected to enable RRI to act more independently and professionally as a full PSB.

Though most transformation has come about as the result of major political upheavals, there have also been PSB developments in stable societies, some more successful than others. The essential factor for success is vocal public support which wins over the political elite.

Many broadcasting organisations were set up in the 1940s and '50s, with noble aspirations to be PSBs. Over time, a good many of them have moved away from the PSB model, and have become either state or commercial broadcasters, or a mixture of the two. In many such state broadcasters, the Government pays the salaries and capital costs and the broadcaster is required to fund the programmes out of advertising revenue. So such organisations have the worst of both worlds: they are expected to support the Government in return for their grant, and they are beholden to their advertisers. How can they move successfully towards full PSB?

They cannot make the transition without government agreement and this is not lightly given. But they can embark on a deliberate strategy of influencing the government and they are well placed to do so. Sometimes broadcasters do not realise their potential power to set the political agenda. There will not be quick results. What is needed is a long term campaign, lasting years, to put the need for quality broadcasting nearer top the top of the political agenda. This can be done if broadcasters encourage partnerships and use their resources to run TV and radio programmes based on events and publications which raise awareness of the need for a full PSB. Their target audience is legislators, opinion-formers, media and academics. As Tim Suter¹³, MD Perspective Associates in the UK, puts it: "It is all a question of political will and political expectation. Politicians have to be convinced that there is something in it for them. This can only be improved quality of governance, through long term increase in the level of trust in government and public bodies." Another gain is that politicians are relieved of the burden of running the state broadcaster, which can be, for them, a can of worms.

¹³ Interview in London by Elizabeth Smith 11.2.11

What can be done – realistically – to move things along? One good way is to use, or set up, supportive groups of concerned citizens to lobby for PSB. Another is to use paid lobbyists, operating through such groups. Such groups can organise lectures, studies, conferences and booklets, and the broadcaster can publicise them. Regulators and politicians and the civil servants dealing with broadcasting can be deliberately targeted in such events. Too many broadcasting conferences are aimed just at the broadcasters. The real need is ones aimed deliberately at those with the power to alter things. It is no use preaching just to the converted.

Let us look, for example, at the efforts made in recent years to make the lumbering giants of India's state broadcasting, Doordarshan and All India Radio, into full PSBs. Over recent years, the Indian Government set up a Prasar Bharati board, bringing them together as part of a move towards PSB status. But the necessary legislation has been bogged down by political disagreements, there is an investigation going on into possible wrongdoing over sports contracts and the state broadcasters struggle to retain their audiences. There is an association of concerned citizens called Friends of the Prasar Bharati but, reading their output, you can see their exasperation at lack of progress made by the Prasar Bharati. Due to lack of will for change among the politicians, the state broadcasters are not winning the battle. Despite efforts to improve the quality of Doordarshan's news, there is a failure to capture mass audiences in the face of ferocious commercial competition.

One of the best recent developments in PSB in India, however, is the success of Lok Sabha TV which is, significantly, funded not by the Government but by Parliament.

Unless India's politicians pass legislation to enable the state broadcasters to transform themselves, they – the state broadcasters – will be increasingly ignored by mass audiences until they will be deemed unworthy of the public funding devoted to them. They are over-bureaucratic and overstaffed, their programmes are not as modern and attractive as those offered by commercial companies, their staff are older than the competition, and their support base is weak. They are vulnerable to sudden death by any new incoming government determined to cut costs.

If the battle for DD and AIR is eventually lost, then those who care about PSB should have alternatives in mind. Though not as good as a strong PSB, the alternatives could be useful. New legislation, for example, could be required to provide a certain amount of PSB content to be carried by all commercial broadcasters, appropriate to their formats. And funds could be set aside for certain PSB elements such as the broadcasting of Parliament and educational programming, which could be bid for competitively. Such costs would be lower than supporting a PSB but the broadcasters would lose the advantages of the continuity of funding, which would make it harder to ensure the highest quality.

Another example of a broadcaster trying hard, but with only partial success, to develop full PSB status, is in Hong Kong. The government-owned station, Radio Television Hong Kong, occupies a unique position in the former British colony, now a special administrative region of China. While news and entertainment is provided by

four free to air terrestrial commercial broadcasters and two pay TV services, RTHK has always been sought after by audiences wanting high quality productions and independent documentaries and current affairs.

Over the years there have been two attempts to turn RTHK into an independent broadcaster. In the mid eighties, a government-appointed board proposed full autonomy for RTHK. The proposal was shelved after a few years of discussions because of political complications as Hong Kong moved closer to 1997 and its handover to China. The second attempt kicked off in 2006 with the government appointing a committee to review PSB in Hong Kong. This produced a report recommending the setting up of a PSB in Hong Kong but argued that it was not desirable for RTHK to be turned into this new entity. In the subsequent debates, democratic forces in the community campaigned for RTHK to become the new PSB while conservative sectors were apprehensive about RTHK going independent.

The eventual decision was a compromise – RTHK would remain within the government structure but would perform the functions of a full PSB. There is no statutory government promise of editorial independence, however. Unlike the BBC, which is a Corporation, RTHK has to operate as a Government Department and is subject to their budgetary processes. For now, RTHK is settling into its PSB role under a clearer government policy, If past events are any guide, it will continue to defend its independence fiercely, though how far this can be successful within the government structure remains to be seen.¹⁴

A neighbouring country, meanwhile, with a very different history has managed a very good degree of success in establishing a PSB. This is Taiwan. There the call for a PSB came in 1980 but it was not till 1998, with the help of the Public Media Lobbying Alliance, that the necessary legislation was set up. Although founded mainly by the government, the Public Television Act states clearly that PTS belongs to the public and should operate independently. It was set up as a full PSB, free from Government and commercial control. However, to what extent is this realised in practice? There are financial pressures. As Jessie Shi¹⁵, Deputy Director International Department PTS, explained to me: "In 2008, the Legislative Yuan froze half the PTS budget and greatly threatened PTS's autonomy. Fighting for PTS funding and independence, over 160,000 Taiwan citizens signed up on the Internet within two weeks to support PTS. Three thousand people paraded the streets to voice their firm support of independent operation of PTS. The result turned out to be good - in 2009, the Legislative Yuan agreed to release the frozen budget to the PTS Foundation. However, fierce competition in Taiwan's TV industry leads to an unusual low-audience share in every channel. People in Taiwan can enjoy more than 100 channels at low cost. Under these circumstances, PTS had the audience share of 0.97 % in 2008, 1.28% in 2009 and 1.26% in 2010." So it looks to me as if PSB in Taiwan has won the battle for independence and budget but is struggling to win the

¹⁴ I am indebted to Chu Pui-hing, former Director of Broadcasting in Hong Kong for some of the information in this section, given in an e-mail interview on 15.2.11

¹⁵ Interview by Elizabeth Smith 23.2.2011

audience.

In the Western hemisphere, a grouping of islands in the Caribbean which make up the Bahamas, has been trying for years to change its state broadcaster into a full PSB, so far without success. The Broadcasting Corporation of the Bahamas, under its call sign ZNS, has provided its government with a full business plan and strategic document with its vision for future transformation. But as the GM of the BCB, Edwin Lightbourn,¹⁶ explained to me: “the Corporation has been restructured and staff levels reduced. The new Regulatory Authority URCA is currently conducting an independent study and will make recommendations to the government shortly, Public consultation is currently under way and a document was issued on December 31. But the government has yet to receive the regulator’s recommendations, thus the important questions of legislated funding and independence from reporting to a Government Minister, or Ministerial-appointed Board of Directors, remain outstanding. So the decisions about the fate of ZNS await decisions by the politicians who are taking their time.”

The fate of the Bahamas is typical of many organisations around the world. The will is there among the broadcasters and the public, but governments fail to see what is in it for them. Full PSB status generally comes with full democracy, but it can be lost as well as gained and even in a full democracy, the struggle to create it can be hard to win. The one essential factor for creating or sustaining PSB is the support of the public, but this by itself is not enough; also needed is political will.

Remember, however, that with mobile phones – and increasingly TV on mobile phones – with satellite and cable TV, with the internet, and with Facebook and Twitter, the state broadcaster no longer lives in a world where other sources of images and news can be blocked out. It is now not only international radio which exposes the state broadcaster as biased, out of date and incompetent. The images are there too. So there is really no future for oppressive monopoly state broadcasters. The world has changed. They have lost their monopoly power. The only choice remaining for them is either to transform themselves into a PSB, or to wither away, losing audience and influence, until there is country-wide agreement that they are not worth the money devoted to them. This however, is not yet a truth acknowledged by autocratic regimes, and the pace of change will vary widely, according to political developments in different countries. Eventually, however, I see a very limited future for the state broadcasters – unless they take action now to ensure that they have good public support and then transform themselves into full PSBs.

¹⁶ Interview by Elizabeth Smith by email 17.2.11

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