

## **COMMONWEALTH BROADCASTING ASSOCIATION 2006 GENERAL CONFERENCE (15 – 18 FEB 06)**

### **“Regulating for Quality and Choice”**

The Broadcast media is probably the most pervasive and powerful form of communication in the world. However, it faces competition from a range of media – including newspapers, the internet, cinemas, DVDs, and content on mobile phones and other portable devices.

Given the plethora of media, Broadcasters need to distinguish themselves by providing Choice, Quality and, in my view, Distinctiveness in content. As regulators, we are well aware of this and hence the focus of regulation is to allow broadcasters to provide choice and quality, while being sensitive to community needs.

Here’s a quick look at the Singapore media scene – we have one broadcaster, MediaCorp, with 6 free-to-air TV channels, broadcasting in the 4 official languages.

MediaCorp also operates 13 free-to-air radio stations and carries 6 digital audio broadcasting stations. In addition, another 2 local broadcasters operate 4 radio stations while a subscription radio service offers 2 stations. Cable service is provided by Starhub Cable Vision which delivers 76 channels via the analogue and digital platform<sup>[1]</sup>.

All these broadcasters are licensed by the Media Development Authority which has a dual role of developing and regulating the media. Our aim is to develop Singapore as a vibrant media hub, and to foster a connected society. This means that we need to manage content so that it reflects societal standards, and at the same time, allow for greater choice and access to quality content.

Our approach is to have stricter content guidelines for free-to-air TV and Radio which reaches all homes and are easily accessible; and to accord more flexibility to Cable which is a subscription medium, requiring one to exercise choice.

### **Programme Codes**

Programmes broadcast in Singapore are guided by Programme, Advertising and Sponsorship Codes issued by the MDA, in consultation with the broadcasters.

Here are some of the areas covered by the codes

The Television Programme Code focuses on key concerns, one of which is racial and religious sensitivity. As Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-religious society, there is a need to ensure that programmes do not incite racial or religious intolerance.

The code also takes into account social values such as respect for the family.

To protect the young from unsuitable content, there is a Family Viewing policy which requires programmes before 10pm to be suitable for the family. Programmes with more adult themes can be shown after the 10pm watershed time. In addition, broadcasters have to provide a parental guidance (PG) indicator as well as advice on whether the content has horror, violence or mature themes.

To provide more choice for adult viewers, the MDA introduced a classification scheme for cable programmes 2 years ago (2004). This allows premium channels on cable TV to telecast programmes with mature content, rated '16' or '18' (eg Sex and the City).

### **Programme Advisory Committees**

To ensure that our codes and guidelines reflect community standards, the MDA has Programme Advisory Committees that provide feedback on the range and quality of broadcast programmes.

In all there are four Committees representing the 4 official languages ie English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Members of these committees are drawn from different walks of life and represent a cross section of society including: media specialists, social workers, teachers and housewives.

These committees provide feedback on broadcast programmes and also give suggestions for improvement. They hold dialogue sessions with broadcasters and, give their findings and recommendations on programmes, and how the quality and range can be improved.

### **Public Service Broadcast**

Regulating for choice and quality is not limited to content guidelines alone. We've found that another effective way is to encourage the production of quality content. This is done by funding Public Service Broadcast (PSB) programmes through TV and Radio licence fees.

Here are some of the PSB genres that are supported. They include: current affairs, information, children, arts, drama, local sports and minority programmes ie Malay and Indian programmes.

These programmes are often not commercially viable, and broadcasters, on their own, may not provide sufficient hours to meet the needs of the community. Hence, the funding of PSB programmes adds variety and choice to the programming menu. In addition, these local programmes, which are relevant to the community, also help to foster social cohesion and national identity, reflecting our culture and heritage.

Not all PSB programmes are funded through licence fees. Broadcasters are also required, through licence conditions, to provide some of these programmes at their own expense. This includes the daily news carried on the English and Chinese channels.

## **Future of Content Regulation**

I have outlined the various ways content regulation in Singapore is currently used to help ensure that broadcasters deliver quality content and at the same time give more choice to viewers.

With digitalization of content and a trend towards convergence, the broadcasting landscape is changing rapidly. While broadcasters face challenges in adapting to changes in technology and audience demands; broadcast regulators also face challenges on how to manage content in a new age where content is available on multiple platforms.

In view of this, the MDA constantly keeps tabs on technological developments, updating the Codes and content policies so that we are in tune with changes while giving broadcasters the flexibility to produce creative programmes. At the same time, with a proliferation of content across multi-platforms, there is an increasing need for the industry to self regulate and to exercise good judgement.

The well known adage that broadcasting serves to educate, inform and entertain, still holds true today. And with this critical role comes a social responsibility – the need to be sensitive to the needs and interests of the community.

So while regulators can play a role in regulating for quality and choice, we do need the broadcast industry and the community to be major players too, as the flourishing of choice and quality content will be good, not only for consumers, but for broadcasters as well.

Thank you.

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[1] There are 40 analogue channels and 36 digital channels.