

Public Service Broadcasting in South Korea

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the role of public service broadcasting in South Korea in the context of changing media landscape created by convergence. It explores two issues that have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Firstly, it concerns the interpretation of traditional rationale of public service broadcasting in a more democratised political landscape, as compared to the situation when authoritarian state dictated the definitions and conditions of broadcasting. The other concerns the emerging challenges public service broadcasting has faced in converged and multi-platform environment.

Based on the examinations of the interests involved in key policy decisions, promoting or inhibiting traditional principles of public service broadcasting, and the level its commitment to meet technological challenges, this paper argues that the development of public service broadcasting in South Korea has been hampered largely because of the lack of policy that safeguards public service broadcasting from politicisation. In established democracies, public service broadcasting plays crucial roles in citizenship, culture and education. In South Korea, however, both economic and social rationale that public broadcasters have long pursued has been secondary to political interests.

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Introduction

Public service broadcasting remains uncertain in many countries. There are sharply conflicting interests, pressures on government to accommodate existing vested interests, and a general tendency to lack of coherence and consistency in policy-making. The old rationales that required public service broadcasters to commit to 'being responsible for public' are changing gradually. At the same time, the increasing dominance of what has been labelled economic rationalism has meant a tendency for governments to treat public service broadcasting like commercial one.

This paper examines public service broadcasting in South Korea (hereafter Korea), as this has come to symbolise the struggles over pluralism and deregulation of the broadcast media, most particularly against the past practice of state monopoly and control over television broadcasting. Of particular relevance here is the understanding of public service broadcasting as a complex incorporation of various aspects – political, economic, cultural and technological – which have affected the formation and implementation of the policy agenda for public service broadcasting in any specific country. By examining the extent to which the state has influenced public service broadcasting in the areas of personnel matters and programming, this paper shows that the development of public service broadcasting in Korea has been hampered largely because of the lack of policy that safeguards public service broadcasting from politicisation.

Current Structure of Public Service Broadcasting in Korea

The current structure of public service broadcasting in South Korea is the results of media merger enforced by the military regime in 1980. Table 1 summarises the ownership and financial revenue structure of the two public broadcasters in Korea, the KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) and MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation). They have monopolised the industry in the 1980s, and their dominance continued even with the start of commercial broadcasting by the SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System) in 1991. This has been possible mainly because of the revenue structure that allows them to collect revenue from advertising. This has been so largely because they have been competing for the high ratings, rather than complementing the commercial counterparts. Both KBS and MBC have been actively involved in Pay-TV business through their affiliate companies. KBSN, an affiliate of KBS, provides 6 channels – KBS Drama, KBS Joy, KBSN Sports, KBSW, KBS Kids, KBS Prime – via cable or satellite platforms, while MBC provides three Pay-TV channels.

The growing concern about the KBS for its heavy reliance on advertisements (more than 60 per cent), together with audience dissatisfaction with KBS programming, which aimed to attract mass audience with popular entertainment programs, has placed both the Korean government, the owner of KBS, and the KBS itself in a vulnerable position. The core of the criticism against the KBS was the lack of justification for collecting a license fee from the audience while pursuing its commercial interests at the same time. From the KBS point of view, double-sourcing had been already inevitable as early as in the late 1980s when the penetration rate of the television set reached saturation point. In order to meet the increasing production and operation costs required to run two channels, the KBS had to seek more income from advertising. This has been particularly true when a large proportion of the

audience who were dissatisfied with the KBS refused to pay the licence fee (KW2,500 per month), which has never increased since 1981. While the soliciting of alternative revenue from advertising has been implicitly justified, the KBS could not escape from the criticism that its revenue has come more from advertising. Several attempts made by the KBS to increase the licence fee – the argument that has been based on the economic viability of the KBS in the process of digital switchover – have been continuously rejected by the lawmakers.

Table 1 – Ownership and funding of KBS and MBC.

	KBS	MBC
Ownership	Government	*FBC (70%), Jung-Soo Foundation (30%)
Status	Public corporation	Limited company
Governing body	Board of Governors	FBC Board
Network stations	25 local networks	19 local networks (MBC Seoul station owns more than 51% of its networks' stocks)
Affiliate (program provider)	KBSN	MBC Plus Media, MBS Sports. MBC Super Stations (Local)
Revenue source	KBS1 (licence fee) KBS2 (licence fee + ads)	Advertising

*FBC: Foundation for Broadcast Culture, a government-owned public corporation.

The MBC has developed in a peculiar way. In terms of its ownership, it is owned by public institutions. In terms of its financing, however, it relies entirely on advertising. For this reason, it has been essential for the MBC to attract a mass audience with entertainment programs. This has been the major point of criticism of the MBC for many years. A number of commissioned reports have noted that the public broadcasters' partial or entire reliance on advertising has been the major obstacle which undermined the very nature of public service broadcasting in Korea. Some reports suggested the major structural changes of television broadcasting (BRC, 1999; KBI, 1994; MOI, 1995), while other reports highlighted the way in which public service broadcasters could be better operated and effectively managed without changing their structure and status (KBC, 1994; BPPC, 2001). Unlike the former view, which was made by the proponents of the privatisation of the MBC, the latter view, arguing that MBC's ownership structure has been largely attributable to the inefficient management and operation, emphasised that the role of MBC as public broadcaster could be strengthened if the major shareholder FBC were to take over the remaining shares from Jung-Soo Foundation. In this sense, public broadcasting is an instrument of the state due to both financial and operational conditions and obligations. Despite all these reports commissioned by a number of government organisations, and a plethora of discussions and hearings, nothing has changed. This clearly shows the difficulties of modifying, if not breaking, the current ownership and financing structure of public service broadcasting in Korea. More importantly, however, this is an indication that neither the governments nor the politicians have wanted the system to be changed. It is not surprising to note from the structural constraints that political parties and the government can exert influence on the operation and management of

the broadcasters and the recruitment and selection of staff and members of the board of governors.

State Control over Personnel Affairs

The state control over public service television has been most visible in the appointment and nomination of the presidents and board members of public television broadcasters. The president of the KBS is handpicked by the President of the nation, while that of MBC is appointed by the Board of the FBC that owns 70 per cent of MBC stocks. The eleven members of the KBS Board of Governors are all appointed by the president of Korea at the recommendations of the Korean Communications Commission (KCC). Similarly, the nine board members of the FBC are appointed by the KCC who selects them through open competition. In the past, they were appointed at the recommendation and nomination of the Speaker of the National Assembly and the KCC. As the members of the KBS Board and FBC Board are nominated by the ruling and opposition parties, the board has mainly served as political proxy, rather than as a supervisor who serves on behalf of the public. These structural constraints – that is the President of the nation and the KCC appoint the key positions – have invariably placed the KBS and MBC in a vulnerable position in maintaining its relationship with the state. To illustrate this, it is worth looking at the recent examples of the way in which the CEO of public broadcasters has been appointed and/or dismissed.

In 2003, Rho Mu-Hyun handpicked Mr Choi Moon-Soon, a hardliner with strong background as union leader, as president of the MBC. Mr Choi had been leader of the MBC Union since 1995, but was sacked in 1996 after he orchestrated a strike. He, however, soon returned to work and was elected as the first leader of the National Union of Media Workers, which was launched in 2000 after consolidating all existing media-related unions. As soon as he was appointed as president of MBC, Choi replaced the key positions with the hardliners who had worked with him at the MBC Union. Furthermore, he sacked and replaced seventeen presidents of nineteen regional MBC network stations even before their terms ended (Choi and Kim, 2007). Later, eight of those sacked filed a lawsuit collectively against the MBC and won it (CNMR, 2009). With the government change in 2008, Eom Ki-Young, a former anchor, became the president of the MBC. A series of social issues, such as US beef and Mad Cow disease, have dominated the Korean media in 2008. When *PD Diary*, MBC's flagship current affairs program, aired in-depth coverage of the import beef from the US in 2008, it sparked a huge controversy, creating confusion and distrust against the newly-formed Lee Myung-Bak government. When it turned out that the program has been biased, Eom has been under enormous pressure to take some measures about *PD Diary*. The Lee government replaced the board members of the FBC, and Eom was replaced by Kim Jae-Chul in 2010.

The state's control over personnel matters in the KBS has been more blatant. Jung Yeon-Joo, a former editor with the *Hankyoreh Daily*, a left wing newspaper, was handpicked by the former President Rho Mu-Hyun to become the president of the KBS in 2003. He was reappointed in 2006 for another three-year term, despite strong opposition from the opposition parties and the KBS labour union. The newly elect conservative President Lee through 2007 Election did not waste too much time to replace Mr Jung who had fully supported the ideologies of former Rho government

and the ruling party (CNMR, 2009). Without doubt, this move has met criticism from the main opposition parties who claimed that the Lee administration would try to put the public broadcaster under his control (*Korea Times*, 13 June 2008). Despite the pressure from the government and the KBS union's criticism that he failed to boost the company's profits, Jung refused to resign as he claimed that the President has no legal right to remove the head of KBS. Current Broadcast Law stipulates that the President of Korea has the right to appoint the CEO of KBS at the recommendation of the KBS Board of Governors. The same law, however, does not mention about any grounds of dismissal. In the midst of discussions on the legal interpretations and implications, the Blue House claimed that the president's right to appoint the head of KBS also includes the right to dismiss. In Aug 2008, Mr Jung was arrested by Seoul Prosecutors' Office on allegations of embezzlement, charging him against settling with the National Tax Service (NTS) in the middle of an appeals trial in which the company sought a corporate tax refund, which caused 51.4 billion won (\$43 million) in losses to the public broadcaster (*Korea Times*, 11 August 2008) – Mr Jung was later cleared of this charge, but there were no chance for his reinstatement. Immediately after that, the National Board of Audit and Inspection recommended his dismissal to the KBS Board of Directors for mismanagement and abuse of authority (BAI, 2008). President Lee soon dismissed Mr Jung, and appointed Lee Byung-Soon – a former media advisor to Lee Myung-Bak during the presidential election campaign in 2007 – as new CEO. Mr Lee was replaced by Kim In-Kyu, another media advisor to Lee Myung-Bak in 2007, at the end of 2009.

Another example that showed state control over personnel matters can be found in recent KBS crisis that has been sparked during the coverage of Sewol ferry disaster in April-May 2014. The crisis emerged when Kim Si-Gon, former chief of the network's news bureau, resigned in the midst of criticism against the biased coverage of the ferry disaster. In a press conference Kim revealed that the Blue House (equivalent to White House in the USA) and Mr Gil Hwan-Young, the President of the KBS, had intervened in the news reporting and personnel matters of the KBS (*Hankyoreh*, 17 May 2014). Kim's resignation eventually led to a strike by the KBS Association of Journalists and the KBS unions resulting in the disruption of its news service. They demanded the resignation of Gil Hwan-Young as they believed the public credibility of the KBS was damaged because he, influenced by the Blue House, tried to control of news reporting. Gil's forced resignation, however, is hardly surprising when we know that amongst a total of nine KBS presidents who have been appointed by the President of the nation since 1987, only two completed their terms.

News Coverage of Presidential Elections: From Party Logic to Media Logic?

Another area that shows the vulnerability of the public service broadcasters in Korea is their news coverage of politics. Political communication through television in Korea has been little driven by, what Altheide and Snow (1979) called, 'media logic' until recently. The 'media logic' states that news coverage of politics is more and more autonomously determined by the media and their criteria. According to the 'media logic', the attention on politicians would be determined by journalistic criteria, the working rules of the media and elements that might attract and hold the attention of the public (Van Aelst, et. al., 2008). More recently, the concept of 'media logic' was further elaborated: "... the themes and content of news reporting are decided more by a media frame of reference, and by the practices and activities of journalists,

often inspired by market considerations; hence, a stronger focus on sensational, dramatic and personal conflicts, and, in general, on news that sells (Poletti and Brants, 2010, p.333)”. This logic is in contrast to ‘party logic’ that favors particular party or ideology.

Long tradition of subordination of the public service broadcasters to political power has been well demonstrated in the coverage of the presidential election campaigns. Since the democratic transition in 1987, the media coverage of the presidential elections has been biased according to their political affiliation and ideological orientations. The newspapers have achieved external diversity which allowed them to criticise the political elite and political parties at the other side of their political and ideological spectrum. In contrast to the newspapers, public service broadcasters in Korea have been destined to serve the government of the day. The presence of a number of communication channels created prospects for extensive and intensive coverage of the election campaign. This, however, has little affected the way in which the public service broadcasters cover the presidential election campaigns. In the 1987 and 1992 presidential elections, the candidates of the ruling party have received more exposure than the candidates of other parties. In the 1997 presidential election campaign, television broadcasters’ coverage has been biased in favor of the ruling party (Park, 1998; Son, 1998), such as different broadcasting time and image-shaping. The past two presidential elections in 2002 and 2007, however, have been less driven by ‘party logic’. As Mazzoleni (1987) observed, the traditional party logic was gradually replaced by the media logic in the selection and presentation of politics. Rather than highlighting the candidate from the ruling party, both KBS and the MBC tried to cover the issues based on their own news values and criteria. One of them was the public polls. Regardless of the party the candidate(s) belonged to, television broadcasters covered them as long as they are leading the public polls. In the 2002 and 2007 elections, the broadcasters focused more on eye-catching issues such as dramatic development in coalition and mud-slingings, rather than policy issues (Park, 2007; Lee-Song, 2003). In the 2007 Election, public service broadcasters, driven by ‘media logic’, – that is according to their judgment, the candidate’s wrongdoing could be an important issue for the voters – highlighted corruption scandal that involved the opposition candidate Lee Myung-Bak. Later, it turned out that the media logic was overshadowed by the growing popularity of Lee (Kim and Kim, 2007).

The fact that the Korean public broadcasters’ coverage of presidential election campaigns have been recently driven more by ‘media logic’ than ‘party logic’ can be seen as a sign of change in the way the public service broadcasters cover politics. More importantly, it could be also seen as an attempt by KBS and MBC – the docile media that had followed and supported the ideological ‘colour’ of the ruling party – to distance itself from the ruling party-dominated ‘party logic’. As a result, the political actors from the ruling party could not hold their dominant position on the platform of political communication. This transforming trend, however, did not continue in the 2012 presidential election when ‘party logic’ has been the main drive used by all media, including public service broadcasters (CCDM, 2012). The transforming trend has not been witnessed in programming, current affairs programs in particular, of public service broadcasters.

State's Influence on Programming

One of the major features that distinguish public service television in Korea from its counterparts in other parts of the world is that its programming has not been different from the commercial television at any stage of its development. The pursuance of ratings by KBS (KBS2) and MBC is well shown in the amount of entertainment programs they aired (Table 2). KBS and MBC have been always in competition with each other, and with commercial broadcasters. This is in stark contrast to the way in which public service television has operated in Japan, USA and Australia, where it has functioned mainly as complementary to commercial television. In Japan, for example, although the NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai, or Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) has been the major broadcaster, its programming has been very different from commercial programming, yet it has been able to attract a large number of loyal audiences. Similarly, the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), despite its decreasing audience in recent years, has hardly been in competition with commercial broadcasters for ratings.

Table 2 – Total broadcast hours and distribution of programs on terrestrial television in 2012.

Programs Channels	News & Current Affairs		*Cultural programs		**Entertainment		All	
	hours	%	hours	%	hours	%	hours	%
KBS1	2,427	31.7%	4,180	54.5%	1,059	13.8%	7,666	100%
KBS2	577	7.9%	3,361	45.8%	3,401	46.3%	7,339	100%
MBC	1,190	16%	2,458	38.2%	3,417	45.8%	7,463	100%
SBS	1,308	13.8%	2,553	35.8%	3,273	45.9%	7,133	100%

Source: MSIFP & KCC, 2013

*Cultural programs: educational programs and documentary

**Entertainment: dramas and show programs

In Korea, however, competition has existed from the beginning of public service broadcasting. In the 1970s, the KBS had to compete with its commercial rivals, although it did not carry any advertisements. Both the KBS and MBC, as the sole television broadcasters in the 1980s, were allowed to carry advertisements and virtually monopolised the advertising market. The competition amongst the broadcasters for the ratings became stronger in the 1990s with the start of the commercial broadcaster SBS, and this situation still remains unchanged. The state political control has remained unchanged for the most part, in spite of the reforms and the extension of television broadcasting structures, including the creation of new bodies such as FBC and SBS. This is well evidenced from the fact that 75% of the journalists working for KBS believed that KBS news programs are influenced by political power (Dong-A, 28 May 2014). In order to illustrate the point, this section briefly presents the way in which the current affairs programs on KBS and MBC have been produced under the different governments.

Current Affairs Programs under Reformist Rho Mu-Hyun Government (2003-2007)

Rho Mu-Hyun was elected as president when the generational divide was at its height. Given that regional and ideological rivalry had dominated the political landscape for the past four decades, the polarization on generational lines was a significant change that emerged in the democratisation process. The weekly current affairs programs were filled with issues that left-leaning ideologies, which had been prohibited under the conservative governments in the past. *Sisa Tonight (KBS2)* was one of the programs that started immediately after Jung Youn-Joo was reappointed by President Rho Mu-Hyun as the president of the KBS. The majority of political topics covered in the program in 2006 have been in favor of the ruling coalition parties, while very few topics were in favor of the opposition party, GNP (Grand National Party, renamed as Saenuri Party in 2013) (Choi & Kim, 2007). The comments on the opposition party made by the presenters, reporters and interviewees were mostly negative, while their comments on the ruling coalition were predominantly positive. Likewise, the footages about the opposition party were all negative, while the ruling parties were shown in positive images.

The program's bias was most notable in its coverage of North Korea. In their analysis of the programs broadcast after North Korea resumed Nuclear Test in September 2007, Choi and Kim (2007) found that the program demonstrated its pro-North Korea and anti-USA stance, which were in line with the reformist government's policy. The typical framing of the program maintained during sample period (September – November 2007) was that the United States has to be blamed for the North's Nuclear Test, and it's little to do with 'Sunshine Policy' – the reformist governments' official policy toward North Korea. *Media Focus (KBS1)* was launched in 2003 as media critique and monitoring program. Being a program critical to media, it requires fairness, accuracy and balance. Contrary to this, however, the program has been devoted to criticising particular party (GNP) and media (conservative media) as their main target (CCFM, 2007). While criticising the conservative media, the logic of 'black and white' was applied. This was well shown in the fact that virtually all comments, narrations, and interviews about the conservative media were negative, while the coverage of progressive media was all positive (CCFM, 2007). Not surprisingly, the program seldom criticised its own, let alone KBS. The implication for this is crystal clear. It supported the ideology of the reformist government. The program also was at the heart of controversy when it aired a North Korean revolution song during the air time. Earlier in 2003, 'Song of Kim Il-Sung' – a song that praises Kim Il-Sung, former leader of North Korea – had been aired in one of KBS's feature programs. From these, we can say that the basic principles of public service broadcasting have been subordinated to ideological orientation of the producers, KBS and the reformist President.

Now we can reveal (MBC), a historical documentary program launched in 1999, ended in June 2005 after showing its 100th episode. More than half of its episodes were devoted to examining the contemporary historical issues/events that occurred during the authoritarian governments. They were reflected as regimes that delayed democracy, and the issues were addressed largely in negative perspective. What these regimes achieved for the nation was hardly mentioned. In stark contrast, the program aired only two episodes for the issues occurred during the reformist governments.

Table 3 – The periods and themes covered in *Now We Can Reveal*

Period covered	Themes covered
Japanese Occupation & Liberation: 9	Liquidations of Japanese Colonial legacy: 9
Rhee Seung-Man government: 17	Reunification and North Korea: 9
Park Jung-Hee government: 33	Korean War: 7
Chun Doo-Hwan government: 15	Korea-U.S. relations: 12
Rho Tae-Woo government: 2	Red Complex: 13
Kim Young-Sam government: 4	Grass Root's Resistance: 7
Kim Dae-Jung government: 2	Unknown Story of Power Struggle: 10
General history: 17	Human Rights: 13
	Social Issues: 14

A closer look at the themes covered in the program discloses that it broadened the ideological spectrum (Table 3). Yet, on the other hand, the fact that more than 40 episodes were related to North Korea demonstrates that the program reflects the reform government's 'Sunshine Policy'. These episodes attempted to redress the conventional view of North Korea – that is, it is not a main enemy of South Korea but its brother who is a partner for dialogue and cooperation in the peace and reconciliation of the two Koreas, ultimately leading to the reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Current Affairs Programs under Conservative Lee Myung-Bak Government (2008-2012)

The change of the government in 2008 brought the change of the programming on the public service broadcasting channels. The newly-appointed presidents of the KBS and MBC soon influenced the current affairs programs, reflecting the new government's policy and ideology in them. In 2008, Lee Byung-Soon, the newly appointed President of KBS, replaced the producers of the existing current affairs programs. Two investigative programs, '*Sisa Journal*' and '*Media Focus*' were replaced by '*Sisa 360*' and '*Media Critique*', respectively. Other existing current affairs programs such as '60 Minutes' and 'KBS Special', largely cover soft topics, social and cultural issues, rather than political issues. KBS was not alone in restructuring its programming. The newly-appointed president of the MBC, Kim Jae-Chul, abolished two investigative reporting programs, '*Hu Plus*' and '*Kim Hye-Soo's W*', and replaced them with entertainment programs. Through a restructuring process, MBC's flagship '*PD Note*' that had been produced by the production section was placed under the scheduling section (Jung, 2011).

As a result, investigative reporting has been discouraged in the flagship current affairs programs on both KBS and MBC. This was particularly notable in MBC's *PD Note* (Table 4). In 2008, 59% of its programs dealt the political or /and economic issues that involved powerful elites, but it was dropped to 44% in 2010. On the other hand, the percentage of the soft issues – e.g social issues, accidents/events, entertainment, international issues – covered in the two programs increased. Investigative reporting – e.g reporting of corruption, wrongdoings and structural problems – has been diminished in both programs. In *60 Minutes*, the drop of investigative reporting was more visible in corruption and structural problems, while the reporting of economic issues increased (Kim, 2011).

Table 4 – Number of items covered in *60 Minutes* and *PD Note*, 2008-2010.

Items	<i>60 Minutes (KBS): 171</i>			<i>PD Note (MBC): 212</i>		
	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Issues that involve political/economic elites	18 (32.7%)	31 (43.7%)	18 (40.0%)	43 (58.9%)	39 (48.8%)	26 (44.1%)
Issues with non-political/economic elites	37 (67.3%)	40 (56.0%)	27 (60.0%)	30 (41.1%)	41 (51.2%)	33 (55.9%)
All	55 (100%)	71 (100%)	45 (100%)	73 (100%)	80 (100%)	59 (100%)

Source: compiled from Kim (2011).

Conclusion

The changing pattern of state control over television broadcasting has been similar to that of newspapers, with one major exception. When the political system shifted to a more pluralistic one in the late 1980s, a shift from incorporation to cooptation occurred in the case of newspapers (Yoon, 1994). The degree of state control over television broadcasting in the same period, however, did not show any significant change from that of cooptation. The government control over public service broadcasting is not surprising. Governments in Korea sought advantage in their continuing domination of the public service broadcasting, but governments change hands and were bound to do so again. The public broadcasters in Korea had been used to be criticised for being in favour of the conservative parties until 1997. They were under fire for being in favour of the reformist governing parties during 1998-2007. Under the conservative governments (2008-), public service broadcasters, KBS and, to a lesser extent, MBC, have been again criticised because of their conservative stance.

State control of public service broadcasting in Korea has been gradually intensified within the political context under authoritarian governments until 1987. However, the emerging political diversity provided by new governments since then, has not brought any significant deregulation or relaxation. This means that the state, to a varying degree, has exerted and is continuing to exert control within the established framework of restrictions. As demonstrated in this paper, this has been strengthened by the fact that the government and the ruling party, still somehow have a dominant position of control in appointing personnel and programming.

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