

TV newcomer makes a splash

Hongkongers are starting to lose interest in watching television, because of to declining programme quality and changing viewing habits. Can the new HKTV service revitalise the city's flagging local television scene – or is the medium doomed?

HONG Kong Television Network (HKTV, 香港電視網絡), the **brainchild** of telecom “wonder boy” Ricky Wong Wai-kay (王維基), commenced broadcasting on 19 November last year, amid much **fanfare**.

Its debut drama, *The Election* (選戰), added to the hype with a timely plot of a future female Hong Kong chief executive, just as the territory is embroiled in an epic political controversy over universal suffrage.

HKTV said it attracted a daily average of 560,000 viewers in its first week, a promising start. But is the initial success just a burst of spectacular fireworks, or will the station grow into a **sustainable** alternative for the viewing public?

Declining clout of TV

HKTV has emerged at a time when the influence of local television has waned significantly, both as a form of entertainment and as a prime force of popular culture.

Gone are the days when families spent the entire evening sitting in front of the television, and the programmes were major

talking points among friends and colleagues the following day.

Wong Kwok-keung, a 24-year veteran in the field and HKTV head director, talks about this golden era of local television thus: “That was a time when TV led the local culture, when brilliant graduates flocked to work in the industry, which was also the centre of a web of creative industry branches.”

Back then, TV was the breeding ground for superstars like Chow Yun-fat, Andy Lau Tak-wah and Stephen Chow Sing-chi. But that was decades ago. “I can’t see local television wielding such power now,” Wong says.

Deteriorating content quality

UNSATISFACTORY programme quality has driven away viewers and drawn **incessant** consumer complaints in recent years. Industry analysts say the problem is due primarily to a lack of competition.

While there are two free-to-air stations in Hong Kong, Television Broadcast (TVB) has always overshadowed Asia Television (ATV).

TVB’s dominance has been further bolstered by habitual viewing – people tune in night after night out of habit. The imbalance was so great that viewership was recorded even for TVB’s after-hours test screen, when programming had finished for the night.

No competition means a lack of incentive to create better content, or even to maintain a certain level of quality. While TVB squanders its advantage, competitor ATV simply lacks the resources to catch up.

HKTV = competition?

VIEWERS, of course, hope that HKTV will provide the much-needed **stimulus** for improvement.

The station’s line-up does seem to span a wide spectrum of topics – from cosmetic surgery to politics and even supernatural themes. But TVB’s non-drama production controller, Sandy Yu Wing-shan (余詠珊), does not see HKTV as a competitor.

She says building up a TV station from scratch is a monumental undertaking, with few successful cases in Asia. The content delivery system, source of revenue and promotion are all issues that have to be taken care of before a station should even start considering its programming.

But Wong says that his station need not clash head-on with the incumbents. It only has to tap into the 80 percent of people who are not watching TVB or ATV, and it is targeting a different group anyway.

Online vs airwaves

HKTV ‘broadcasts’ via the internet instead of the airwaves, and this mode of content delivery is viable, as is shown by the success of video-on-demand services such as Netflix, which uses common OTT – Over-The-Top – technology.

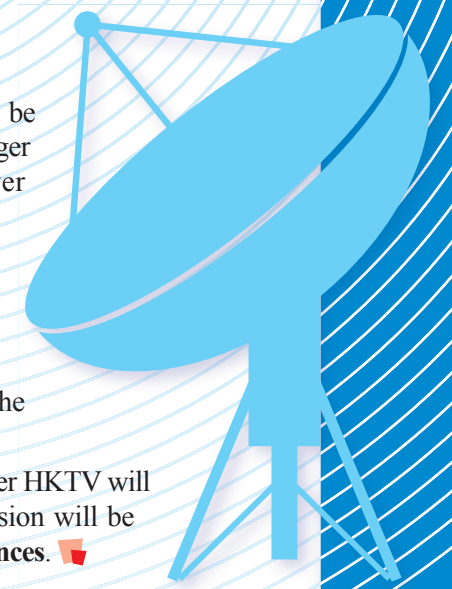
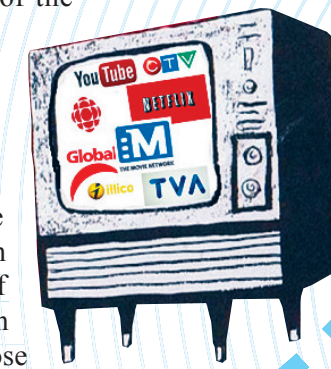
HKTV also employs the same delivery mode, which has the added advantage of supporting interaction with the viewer, who may choose when and where to watch the content.

Changing habits

RATHER, the more significant issue facing all TV operators, including paid cable television services, is the dwindling size of television audiences in general.

Different television programming services in Hong Kong

	HKTV	Free-to-air stations	Paid TV
Content delivery mode	internet (OTT)	airwaves	fixed network
TV programming licence	not required	required	required
Licence fee	no need to pay	must pay	must pay
Code of Practice	not applicable	must comply	must comply
Main revenue	commercial time sales	commercial time sales	subscription fees/commercial time sales



Many viewers are choosing to spend what used to be their TV viewing time on their computers. The younger generation, in particular, chooses the internet over conventional TV as their preferred pastime.

Hong Kong Information Technology Federation president Francis Fong Po-kiu (方保僑) observes, “Even young children know how to use tablet computers. In some families, probably grandma and granddad are the only ones sitting in front of the television.”

So, it seems that the **ultimate** question is not whether HKTV will survive and **thrive**, but whether conventional television will be ousted by the people’s changing entertainment **preferences**.

Key ideas

The quality of locally-produced television programmes has been falling as the result of a chronic lack of real competition between the two existing free-to-air stations, with one dominating the other in market share. The launch of a new programme service promises to inject life into the lacklustre local TV scene. But like all TV operators, it must face the fast-fading clout of television as a preferred form of entertainment.

Did you know?

As HKTV is delivered over the internet, it does not need to obtain a free-to-air television programming licence from the government. And as it is not a licensee, it need not comply with any licensing conditions, such as mandatory broadcasting of public interest content or maximum commercial time, nor does it have to observe the rules of operation under the Generic Code of Practice which applies to TVB and ATV.

Critical Questions:

1. Do you think HKTV will stimulate real competition within the local television industry?
2. Does conventional television have a future as a major form of entertainment?

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