

## **Rashid Hajili**

### **PUBLIC BROADCASTING SERVICE: A STEP FORWARD OR A STEP BACK?**

The public television and radio broadcasting station in Azerbaijan is frequently called the second governmental channel. Although, in contrast to public broadcasting, government television (AzTV) is, according to its legal status, under the direct control of the Azerbaijan presidential staff.

Public broadcasting did not make its appearance in Azerbaijan in the same way as in other post-communist countries. The main difference is that Azerbaijan did not transform government broadcasting into a public service and did not close down the former. Azerbaijan simply created a new television and radio broadcasting service, which it calls public broadcasting, but finances from the national budget. Now the country has two national broadcasting channels financed from the national budget. The first is the old governmental channel, which, according to its legal status, is still controlled by the government. The second should be fully independent of any political influence, according to the law on public broadcasting, but it nevertheless is also under the control of the powers that be.

This all goes to show that real public television can only exist where there is democratic governance, effective division of power, the rule of law, and a strong and efficient civil society.

After many months of struggle, public appeals from experts, and discussions held by both local and international organizations, many provisions of the law granting the country's chief executive officer broad powers to form the governing bodies of public television were changed. Unfortunately, this did not yield the sought-for results in practice. Under the law on public television and radio broadcasting, neither the head of state, nor any other government structure may participate in appointing the General Director of public television, or the members of the Broadcasting Council. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Press Council, creative unions, religious organizations, labour unions, employer associations, women's and youth organizations, sports organizations, and the National Academy of Sciences, nominate candidate members of the Broadcasting Council who are to be approved by the country's parliament. The General Director of the public broadcasting service is elected to and dismissed from office by the Broadcasting Council. This would all seem correct and proper.

But in practice, we see the direct opposite: the absolute majority of the above-listed non-governmental organizations are under the strong influence and often under the direct control of political power. As a result, even youth and religious organizations, the Press Council, and creative unions nominated as candidate members of the Broadcasting Council those persons who were approved of by the government.

Elections of the General Director was proof again that those who talked about the Broadcasting Council's complete dependence on the will of the powers that be were right. It was precisely the candidate nominated and lobbied by the presidential staff who was elected General Director.

The Azerbaijan authorities did not fulfil the promises they made when joining the Council of Europe to transform government broadcasting into a public service. Any attempts to convince the country's government that the governmental channel (AzTV) should be closed down have not been crowned by success. Having created the public broadcasting service, the government

has essentially acquired another channel that is under its control and financed from the national budget.

Today, the government has many levers of influence on public broadcasting. These include control over the parliament and many of those non-governmental organizations which by law have the right to nominate candidate members of the Broadcasting Council. What is more, the fact that it finances public broadcasting is also an extremely effective lever of control. The entire process of drawing up, approving and, ultimately, executing the budget is in the hands of the executive power. The Ministry of Finance controls the spending of budget allocations. In this way, if it does not have “good and friendly” relations with the government, public broadcasting will always have trouble finding the funds to support its activities.

In 2005, five billion manats were officially allotted from the national budget to the public broadcasting service, which is a little more than US\$1 million. This was 14 times less than the amount allotted to government television. In 2006, the allotments to public broadcasting amount to approximately US\$12 million. Some observers say this is payment for the services that public broadcasting is rendering the government.

When the head of the government television information service, a parliament deputy, was appointed General Director of the public broadcasting service, the main unofficial argument put forward by several members of the Council was as follows: “Because of the support he enjoys in the government and his other ties, he (the current director of PBS) will be the only one able to obtain the money, the building, and all equipment necessary for normal functioning of the public broadcasting service.” Unfortunately, they were right. Probably in countries with underdeveloped political institutions, where corruption and disregard of the law run rampant, the creation of an island of “public broadcasting” will always have such contradictions.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the Broadcasting Council with its enormous powers set forth by the law has in reality been left at a loose end. The Council is not even trying to make use of its administrative powers. The Council does not have any auxiliary structure or funds for executing its powers. The Council members generally have little idea about television and radio journalism, how to manage television and radio broadcasting, and how to regulate broadcasting activity. What is more, since the Council members receive no salary, many are not even bothering to study the complexities relating to the regulation, monitoring, and administration of the broadcasting service.

All the members of the Council have other jobs. The Council chairman is also a department head and professor at Baku State University. Two members of the Council are also parliament deputies. One of them is the director of the State Academy of Physical Culture, and so on. Without an auxiliary structure and sufficient funds at its disposal for inviting independent experts and auditors, the Broadcasting Council is physically incapable of carrying out its functions of monitoring and controlling execution of the country’s laws and its own decisions.

PBS has been broadcasting since the summer of 2005. In contrast to its “big brother” (AzTV), PBS’s signal does not reach every region of the country. People from the government and PBS itself say that the four to five months which have passed since the channel’s first broadcast are not enough to judge how it is coping with the job. There is probably some truth to their words. But some things can already be judged today. And unfortunately, an analysis of the first months of the channel’s work has done nothing to boost our optimism.

The results of a poll conducted during the parliamentary election on 6 November 2005, unequivocally showed that PBS did not retain an unbiased stance with respect to political forces

and always leaned towards the powers that be. The circles close to the government were mainly featured in news programmes, information reports, and government commentaries. In extremely rare cases did opinions differing from the government's had the chance of finding airtime. To be fair, it should be noted that, in contrast to the governmental AzTV channel, PBS was trying to present a better image and improve its way of conveying information. This is why, in addition to trying to avoid a too biased approach, PBS tended to ignore relevant local news and concentrated more on neutral events and news from abroad.

Unfortunately, there is still no transparency in the activities of the public broadcasting service. Even the members of the Broadcasting Council complain that they do not have access to many of the financial documents and other information relating to the channel's management and administration. It is still not clear how much money the government actually allotted this year (2005) to PBS's needs and how these funds are being spent. There is no transparency in the competitive selection of journalists, department heads, producers, and so on.

The regulations defining intracorporate relations have not been elaborated either. Journalists are often uptight, they do not feel protected or professionally independent. All of this means that PBS still does not have the opportunities and enabling working environmental necessary for free creativity.

The further development of public broadcasting in Azerbaijan will depend on many factors. Moreover, at this stage, political factors are playing an important, if not crucial, role. The journalists' professionalism, as well as the expertise and managerial skills of the members of the Broadcasting Council and executive personnel are also very important. These questions should be given special attention.

In the near future, the public, via the members representing it in the Broadcasting Council, should be given a greater role to play in the management of television and in the decision-making process. An efficient Broadcasting Council will significantly simplify the relationship between the public with their specific needs, and the television company management, introduce efficient control over the television company's activity and over the quality of its work from the viewpoint of carrying out publicly important functions and from the perspective of popularity ratings, as well as over the transparency of the television company's use of funds and business operations. Enormous efforts should also be made to ensure that the Council begins taking the most active part in monitoring pluralism of expression of public opinion when preparing programmes for public broadcasting companies, in particular, when broadcasting political news.

All of these measures should immediately be put into practice in order to avoid adding new problems to those which already exist. Only by means of targeted efforts aimed at bringing public television up to the standards and rules generally accepted for public broadcasting can PBS stop being merely a tool in the hands of the powers that be, and become a truly public service aimed at providing people with an opportunity to raise, discuss, and analyse the problems crucial and of interest to them. Only in this way can public broadcasting become a force capable of ensuring democracy, as well as a "watchdog" which, concerned with public interests, sees to it that the government conscientiously fulfils its functions.

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Chairman, Media Rights Institute, Azerbaijan