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A study of the marketing position and strategy for serving the public interest and formulating programs for public radio stations

Abstract

Due to the severe competition in the broadcasting market, public radio stations face a challenge. How does a public radio station position itself to attract audience attention? Will the audience reject this station because of its “public media” identity? How can a public radio station serve the public interest as “public media”? What are the audience expectations? How can a public radio station embrace its own marketing position and public interest through its program formulation? To understand the marketing position of public radio stations, their performance in serving the public interest, and their strategy for program formulation, this case study of the Kaohsiung Broadcasting Station (KBS), a municipal government-owned radio station, utilized in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and the supplementary analysis of internal documents. This study confirms that public radio stations have a positive meaning and values. Public radio stations create a new style of public media through their marketing position, how they serve the public interest, and their strategic program planning. This study provides references for the operation and management of public radio stations.

Keywords: marketing position, marketing strategy, public radio stations, public interest.

JEL Classification: M10.

Introduction

With the continuous expansion of the broadcasting radio channel, local radio broadcasting in Taiwan faces fierce competition. A small number of high-power radio stations follow an integrated stream to appeal to a general audience in all regions of Taiwan; however, to survive, most radio broadcast stations have changed their operational mode to categorized radio stations or community serving radio stations. Local community radio stations have become a goal in the broadcasting market. Given the fierce competition in the broadcasting market, the selected marketing position has a substantial impact on the operation of radio stations. KBS, the Kaohsiung Municipal Broadcasting Station (KMBS), was originally broadcast on AM channel 1089 kHz with a transmission range covering only the Kaohsiung areas. The open policy of the broadcasting market increased the competition between radio stations. To promote competition that will lead media companies to better satisfy consumers' preferences (Shelanski, 2006). Therefore, one important task for the management of these broadcasters has been to secure the broadcasting market position of their radio station.

Just like the increased commercialization and privatization of British broadcast media poses a fundamental threat to the “public interest” as pressures of the marketplace transform traditional concepts of public service (Feintuck and Varney, 2006). Standing out is the key to survival for a radio station in the competitive broadcasting market; therefore, proper market positioning becomes the first task. As a marketing strategy,

marketing position rose in importance in the middle of the 1950's. General audiences receive numerous daily messages from different media, so the main consideration for any marketing position is identifying how to stand out from other competitors and impress the audience (Albarran, 2006). For the broadcasting industry, the marketing position would be the establishment of a clear identity and audience recognition that allows the station to stand out from competitors. The scholar Eastman believed that the marketing position is intended ‘to make the audience believe that a radio station or television company is different from others’ (Eastman, 1993).

Public service broadcasting is in the uneasy perch because the seemingly inexorable consequence of widely-lauded “market forces”. Because KBS is affiliated with the Kaohsiung Municipal government, its budget is compiled by the municipal government. The budget is allocated to KBS after a review by the Kaohsiung City Council. KBS is different from the privately operated radio stations that rely on commercials as the main source of funding. Unlike commercial radio stations, the operational objectives of KBS are ‘to enhance the cultural standards of the population; to promote mutual communication between the public and the government; and to expand public service and strengthen the publicity of municipal government’. Therefore, this study conducted a case study of KBS based on the concept of “public interest” using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to evaluate its marketing position, its performance in serving the public interest, and its direction for program formulation. The research questions are listed as follows:

1. Is the KBS marketing position strategy clear enough to impress the audience?
2. Does the KBS public radio station identity match the public interest?
3. Does the program formulation for KBS match its identity as a public radio station? Does the formulation match its purpose of serving the public interest?
4. Does the KBS public radio station identity bring different advantages and disadvantages from those of commercial radio stations?

1. Literature review

This study focused on the unique attributes of KBS to define its position in the market based on a goal of “serving the public interest” in the implementation of its program content. Therefore, we first performed a literature reviews focusing on the “marketing position of radio stations,” “public interest,” and “strategies for program formulation.”

1.1. The marketing position of radio stations.

Market positioning is a technique used to classify the image or identity of a store in the target consumer’s mind (Lee et al., 2006). When customer attitudes have changed, technology has overtaken existing situation, company or store need to make sure consumer’s long-standing perception of them (Jankowski et al., 1996). Lavine and Wackmann (1998), the media operators, in their book *Management Media Organization*, characterized the formation of a media business strategy plan into four stages: goals and objectives, background information, strategy, and an action plan. The management ideas of the broadcasting operators should clarify the goals and objectives for the management and operation of the radio station to provide supervision guidelines for the later stages. Although there are numerous radio stations in the market, the variety of radio programs is very limited. To attract the target audience, the first strategy is to identify an appropriate orientation for the radio station.

For the radio station features, researchers (Lavine, 1988; Robbins, 1991) suggested that the management in broadcast media should pay special attention to four aspects – product characteristics, employee characteristics, the special organizational factors of media, and the social role of media – when they engage in media management. Therefore, the broadcasters should pay attention to trends, any transformations in society, and generational aspects as well as addressing social responsibility. Apart from understanding the expectations of the audience, it is necessary to create the appropriate system to control the broadcasting process (e.g., work management and human resources). Broadcasters should define their market position based on their

own characteristics, the thesis and goals of the radio station, and the needs and changes in society.

The objective of brand (product) positioning is to place a brand that is clearly distinguishable from competitors’ brands on the market, the principal aim is to ensure that the brand occupies a unique position on the market (Herrmann and Huber, 2000). Wind (1982) and Aaker (1984) suggested that the “important attributes” could be used as a basis for strategic thinking to define the marketing position. Moreover, according to the definition of Ries and Trout (1986), the marketing position does not just create innovative products but must also shape the consumer’s perception of the existing products to further create positive associations with the station in the market and secure its marketing position. Marketing oriented broadcasting takes into account the audience’s perception of the image and characteristics (“personality”) of the radio station. It should be to reinforce the one or few determinant attributes for which the destination is already perceived positively and competitively (Pike, 2009). Therefore, the basic components of the broadcasting channels, such as the radio station’s logo, name, jingle, and slogan should be simple and easy to remember.

As described above, the marketing position of a radio station must be clear and simple to impress the audience. The usage of various identification symbols (e.g., slogans, station name, and jingles) can catch the attention and result in audience familiarity. Market positioning usually includes a brand name, symbols such as a logo, and a slogan (Supphellen and Nygaardsvic, 2002; Pike, 2004). This is despite the fact that public service broadcasters increasingly depend on public support for their continued survival (Johnson, 2013). Taking the above suggestions to inductively analyze a suitable strategy for the marketing position of KBS, the broadcaster should follow the six proposed marketing position strategies in Wind’s (1982) and Aaker’s (1984) studies to define the position based on KBS’s characteristics and the market competition, just as Aaker (2002) suggests that a company consider its brand not just as a product or service, but as an organization, a person and a symbol. Because KBS belongs to Kaohsiung municipal government and serves the public from all social classes, it cannot determine the marketing strategy according to the public’s preference or based on broadcast advertisements. Thus, KBS should make use of its unique advantages stemming from the characteristic of non-profit service to define its marketing position based on its usage and its usage occasions.

1.2. Public interest. Media have become the core of crucial democratic site that social theorists refer to as public sphere (David and William, 2006). The radio and television policy in the USA and in the majority of European countries is based on the purpose of serving the public interest and the approachable right of use from the public domain and the media. The fundamental basis is adopted using the following two reasons as its legal basis. Mass media in the public interest: Towards a framework of norms for media performance (McQuail, 1991). This study analyzes a case study of KBS. Because KBS is a government operated radio station, its operation should focus on serving the public interest. Moreover, because the broadcasting frequencies are limited, all broadcasters should commit to placing a priority on balanced and diverse radio programs that serve the public interest. To make the balance of component political, social and economic values (Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003) that shape the definition of the public interest that KBS supposedly serve to do.

McQuail (1993) believed that the media does serve the “public interest” and “public welfare”. The mass media is different from other businesses and from the service industries because its basic responsibility is to promote the interests of society, especially in culture and politics. Considering public interest to be the core value of the media, a broadcasting program should be diverse, integrated, and practical. To serve the public interest in the media, the primary consideration should be the social recognition of broadcasting benefits, such as diversity of opinion, liberalization, education, art, information, and cultural identity. The concept of diversity includes product diversity, idea diversity, and access diversity (Entman and Wildman, 1992). Hoynes (1994) suggested that the public interest must be implemented under the protection of the government to reflect the needs of different ethnic groups and organizations.

The only solution to effectively balance the shortcomings of a purely commercial media system is the presence of public radio stations (Graham and Davis, 1992). Aufderheide (1992) also demonstrated that the public broadcasting system should serve the public interest, pursue a citizen based society, and struggle to maintain the public domain. A public radio station should provide a venue for the “public” and not act as a medium to isolate the public.

1.3. Strategies for program formulation. This version of the public interest aims for an efficient market, where efficiency means that media companies take consumer preferences as given and produce as much content as people want, in the varieties they want, as cost effectively as possible

(Shelanski, 2006). To extend the analysis of the previous literature, this study focuses on defining the position of the radio station based on the concept of serving the public interest. To develop multi-stakeholder policy practices is a newly approach in public service broadcasting (Donders and Raats, 2012). This section further elaborates and summarizes the relevant information, including the trend toward program formulation as well as the specific programming strategies.

For any form of radio and television broadcasting, the program is the most decisive factor in market competition. In consequence, the quality and attractiveness of public service broadcasters’ programming relative to that of commercial competitors cannot but decline (Collins, McFadyen and Hoskins, 2001). Good program content with strong marketing is enough to attract audiences and obtain commercial sponsorship opportunities (Head and Sterling, 1987). Programming is the core product of a radio station and is the most critical factor influencing the audience’s decision to listen (Schulberg, 1990). Public media should provide the availability of impartial, accurate, non-market oriented news and current affairs, then help high-quality (innovative, risky, diverse and home-grown) programing, culture for various minority, ethnic and religious groups in a pluralist, multi-cultural society (Iosifidis, 2011). Therefore, after the operating mode and position of a radio station has been determined, it is necessary to elaborate its prog-raming strategy.

For a public radio station, the programing strategy is a reflection of “public service”, which provides a common benefit to both majority and minority groups through the public broadcasting service. Public service broadcasting must, therefore, strive to reach those who largely escape it (Collins, McFadyen and Hoskins, 2001). The ‘enjoyer’, should be taken just as seriously as the familiar ‘citizen’ and ‘consumer’ (Mary Debrett, 2009). The diversity of program production and the broadcast of a variety of program content establish a unique character and distinct position in the market, allowing a public radio station to avoid competing on commercial interests or ignoring the public interest.

The audience and the marketing position of a radio station are the two major factors behind the program selection. Blumer et al. (1992) suggested that the program planning of a public broadcasting system should consider factors such as the program type, the target audience, and the public’s needs. And local media are of intense importance to people who consciously and actively associate their identities with the space served by those media (Bareiss, 1998). To define the position of the radio station,

the broadcaster should arrange the program style, the program content design, and the airtime to match the goals and objectives of the radio station.

2. Research design

2.1. Research framework. According to the literature review, we proposed “serving the public interest” as the basis for defining and analyzing

KBS’s market position. The in-depth interviews with KBS employees and the audience focus groups were used to reveal the viewpoints and expectations regarding KBS from the perspectives of its employees and its audience, considering KBS’s operating performance and the operating prospect of public radio stations. This study provided an operating reference for public radio stations.

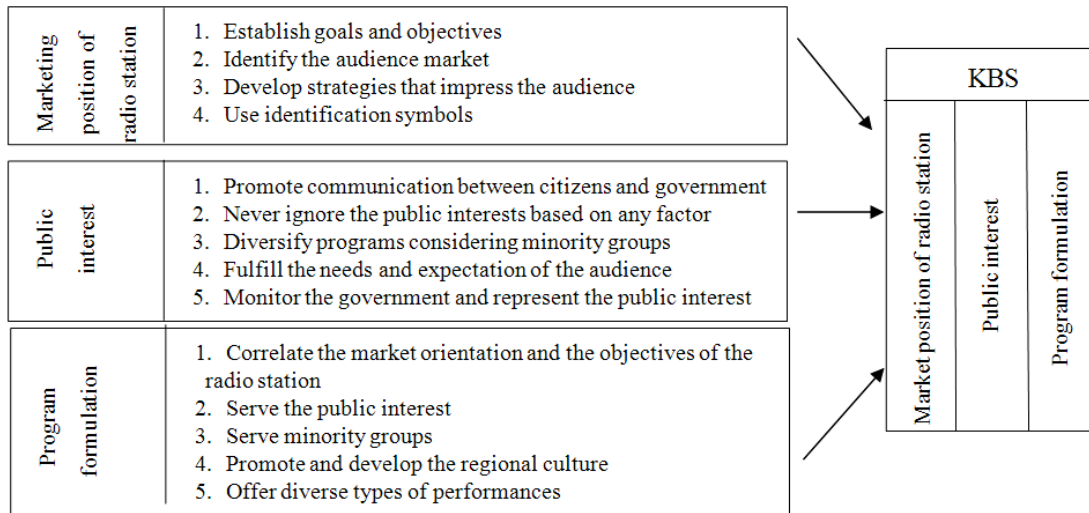


Fig. 1. Research framework

2.2. Research methods. This study adopted qualitative methods, including case study analyses, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Moreover, because the consumption habits of the broadcasting market and the audience are currently prioritized to FM radio listening, this study focused on a case study analysis of KBS FM 94.3.

2.3. The interview process and the outline of the research questions. The semi-structured interviews were performed based on the interview outline. The interviews could be “individual” or “organizational”: an in-depth interview method was adopted for the individual interviews, while the organizational interviews were performed based on focus group methods. The format of the in-depth interviews focused on a detailed discussion and evaluation of specific topics, through which the reaction of the interviewees could be well understood and more complicated questions could be explored. In addition, the interviewees were more willing to participate. Thus, this study used semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Highlights of the in-depth interview:

1. As a public radio station, what is the position and performance of KBS?
2. As a public radio station, how does KBS meet expectations with regard to serving the public interest?
3. As a public radio station, how is the program

formulation, production and broadcasting patterns, and audience interaction of KBS?

Key discussions of the focus group:

1. As the audience of a public radio station, what is your overall expectation for KBS?
2. As the audience of a public radio station, what is your evaluation of KBS’s performance in terms of serving the public interest?
3. As the audience of a public radio station, what are your comments and suggestions for improving KBS program planning and KBS production and broadcasting?

3. Research result

According to KBS’s characteristics, this study focused on “serving the public interest” to define the position of the radio station, to consolidate the unique position of KBS in the competitive broadcasting market, to explore the wider operational dimensions, and to gain a higher radio listenership and a better reputation. Thus, this study focuses on “public interest” as the theoretical basis for an analysis of KBS that is supported by the in-depth interviews and focus groups.

3.1. A position analysis of KBS: a weak position creates an unclear impression for the audience. Most Kaohsiung citizens did not recognize the station name or the jingle of KBS. However, other commercial radio stations or public service radio stations

(e.g., the Police Broadcasting Radio Station) delivered a clear message with a catchy station name and station song. In this respect, KBS has room for improvement.

“Because of the identity as civil servants, our performance in the broadcasting program and activities are relatively conservative.” (Supervisor A)

“After all, it seems that we show off comparatively less than commercial broadcasting stations.” (Supervisor B)

To create an atmosphere in which the audience would be reluctant to change to a different channel, the connection between broadcasting programs should be smooth and without a time lag. Secondly, the program title is also a very important characteristic in the broadcasting market. The title should attract audiences, represent the program content, and thereby capture audience attention and gain a higher listenership. Currently, the overall atmosphere of KBS programming is too official; it does not present self-created highlights or personal characteristics.

During the focus group discussion, the audience believed that KBS lacked marketing, indicating an area for improvement. The radio station’s logo is too low-key and the station name is not as impressive and easy to memorize as other radio stations. The broadcasters rarely repeated the radio station’s name. Therefore, the focus groups suggested that KBS broadcast the station name during the programs and publicize the station name as well as the jingle.

“I have listened for five years and really like the programs. However, I just know the name of the radio station today.” (Audience A)

“I have jogged by the entrance of this radio station every morning but only recognized the name of the station when I entered the building today.” (Audience B)

“I have never noticed that the broadcasting programs have mentioned the name of the radio station.” (Audience C)

A marketing position ensures that the audience understands the image or the characteristic of the radio station, and it widens the audience’s imagination and considers their perceptions. During the interview process, the audience displayed limited knowledge regarding KBS’s image. Therefore, even though KBS has the public broadcasting characteristic, it should actively strive for recognition of its marketing position. There is still room for KBS to strengthen its market position.

3.2. KBS’s actual performance in serving the public interest: acting as a bridge between citizens

and the government to raise public awareness. The goals and objectives for the establishment of KBS included the following: (1) improve the cultural levels of the audience; (2) promote communication between citizens and the government; (3) expand public service; (4) strengthen and promote the municipal government. These four management objectives should confirm and apply broadcasting for the public interest based on the majority demands of KBS’s employees.

“I believe that the four management objectives of KBS are inconsistent with the public interest. They include cultural education, public service, public entertainment and the promotion of municipal government – four objectives! I believe that probably covers all aspects.” (Supervisor A)

“The municipal government promotion may need a different presentation in the future... to make the public and audience more receptive, or use a causal way of presentation, which may be very important.” (Programming division A)

“I believe that the purpose of government promotion should be based on public interest; Government promotion is a very important component of public service.” (Supervisor B)

“Since KBS used to be a municipal radio station to provide public service and enhance mutual communication between citizens and government, the government promotion is hard to avoid as an evil policy. The objective is to focus on public interest.” (News division A)

Because the budget for the running of public radio stations is provided from the government, and their operation is under the influence of the municipal government, the budget is sufficient to maintain the basic operation, management, and marketing fees. Therefore, public radio stations do not need advertising revenue for support and are not subject to the constraints of any commercial activity. This lack of advertising has become a significant advantage for the interaction of KBS with its audience and is one of the major reasons that KBS gains listenership.

“I listen to KBS because of its clearness and no advertising.” (Audience C)

“My impression of KBS is no advertising.” (Audience D)

Through the radio broadcasts, the government policy can be announced to the public, in particular any issues closely associated with the public such as traffic, utilities, and welfare, etc. The public can also use KBS as a channel of communication with the government. In addition, with respect to the

consolidation of community consensus and serving minority groups, KBS's performance is praised and approved by the public. Although KBS is a municipal broadcasting station, belonging to the government, it received no criticism from the public evaluation in regards to being bureaucratic; mostly the reviews address serving the public interest.

"The unique advantage of KBS is the needs from a lot of units, in particular the municipal government. From my perspective, KBS has made me understand more about the city where I live." (Audience G)

"KBS should take responsibility for promoting a sense of belonging to Kaohsiung citizens, who are not the passers-by but the hosts of the city, and thus to consolidate the community consensus of Kaohsiung citizens." (Audience H)

"In lacking of financial resources, I believe that the participation of every Kaohsiung citizen will increase the radio listenership and the possibility for the growth of KBS." (Audience I)

After establishing the basic components of the radio station, KBS should focus on broadcasting lifestyle information as a primary theme to become involved in the community. To strengthen the audience's knowledge of lifestyle information, the broadcasters should distinguish the specific topics of lifestyle information to integrate and promote the advantages of the local society. The program style should be vivid but not dogmatic and should educate the audience in a natural and casual way. The broadcasters should take advantage of social resources to plan the program content and should avoid advertising to maintain their greater social responsibility and elaborate the characteristics of a public radio station.

"I think that the program style should be more vitalized to make it more aligned with our daily lifestyle". (Audience L)

"If the programs are vitalized and relaxed, which can deliver the citizens' needs to the government as a channel of mutual communication, based on this direction, the programs will attract audiences from all generations". (Audience M)

"The programs should be more aligned with local culture and focus more on the local community with more public interactions, as if providing instant response from the government." (Audience N)

"Getting involved in the community and public is a way to breakthrough for KBS currently." (Li Shen)

3.3. The program production, broadcasting and audience feedback. Programs are the presentation

of a radio station and are an important criterion for evaluating its quality. In this study, according to the descriptions provided by KBS employees, there was a demonstrated integration of KBS's goals and objectives with its broadcasting programs. The program features are listed as follows:

1. The program orientation is independent of the commercial interests and emphasizes topics that commercial radio stations rarely cover. Regardless of the performance pressure, the program planning emphasizes the public welfare and is oriented toward the public interest. However, to move closer to the audience, the program planning has deliberately imitated commercial radio stations.

"Our programs mostly emphasize the different topics that commercial radio stations do not cover ... because KBS should focus on the relevant topics of public interest and public welfare organization. On the one hand, KBS has to make itself different from commercial radio stations; on the other hand, the KBS channel frequency originally belongs to the public... For example, the programs for the laborers from the Philippines and Thailand would not be broadcast on different radio stations but only KBS." (Programing division A)

"We have no pressure from commercials, therefore, our radio station can compensate for the insufficiencies of the commercial radio stations." (Programing division B)

"Allow more public organizations to participate in the programs to let the public show their lives and deliver their message through the radio station." (Audience O)

"It's not necessary to compare with commercial radio stations. It is a radio station for Kaohsiung citizens, which belongs to everyone...should show the unique and personal features." (Audience P)

2. KBS program planning emphasizes lifestyle information, services, and provisions for minority groups regardless of the size of the audience or the rate of listenership, and it emphasizes access "that includes the true minority groups" based on actual environmental changes. For example, there were no broadcasting programs for adolescents; thus, KBS produced programs for teenagers. After the open policy of the broadcasting market, the number of adolescent programs increased; thus, KBS program planning began to pay more attention to senior audiences. In this regard, the program diversity has a tendency to narrow, which was a concern mentioned by the audience during the focus group discussions.

"We keep the program 'Chinese opera world' because of the senior audience. Since many seniors

passed away, the senior audience is getting smaller; this group of people became a minority among others.” (Programing division A)

“For different populations of the audience, we have programs to target the audience from minority groups, programs for the homosexual population, programs for the native, programs for the Hakka community. We also have special programs for foreign laborers, and programs for foreigners who live in the Kaohsiung area.” (Programing division D)

“For teenagers, children, women, and consumers, if they encounter pressures and unfair treatment, it is necessary to have a channel for their communications and complaints. Strengthening the relevant activities or programs can enhance the diversity”. (Audience Q)

“Programs reflect the truth...needs practical service and reflects the needs of audience.” (Audience Z)

In terms of the program content design, the inseparable connection between broadcasting programs and the audience should be emphasized to ensure interaction between the audience and the Kaohsiung municipal government. In terms of the marketing position of the radio stations, the “Kaohsiung” origin should be highlighted to answer any audience questions and to discuss any problem in Kaohsiung during KBS phone-in programs to establish KBS as a professional radio station that represents Kaohsiung city. The program contents should emphasize the Kaohsiung characteristics of KBS to develop a unique image for the radio station – an irreplaceable and professional image for KBS.

Conclusion and management implications

That means KBS has adopted strategic brand management to negotiate the relationship between its commercial and public service activities. Although KBS is a municipal radio station, the interviewees did not report any negative evaluations or criticize the bureaucratic and political contents during the focus group discussions. On the contrary, because of the financial support provided by the municipal government and KBS’s official identity, KBS has no commercial agenda for its broadcasting programs, which is one of the primary attractions for its audience. In addition, the public also expects KBS to strengthen their interactions with the Kaohsiung municipal government and become a unique intermediary between the Kaohsiung municipal government and Kaohsiung citizens. Regarding the external publicity and promotion of the municipal government, KBS should make use of its character to promote the features of the local community, to act as a bridge between the public and the municipal government, to

play a role in describing the Kaohsiung city construction, to provide social information, and to deliver a cultural education.

Most people endorse the public welfare performance of KBS in some of its broadcasting programs, which deliver programs for minority groups and organizations to educate the public. However, due to KBS’s lack of diverse content, it cannot broadly include various organizations or provide a channel for communications and complaints. In the future, KBS may increase the number of welfare programs to bring a positive value to broadcast media. In terms of program planning, people believe that KBS should provide more lifestyle information to allow people to access their desired information. KBS should also increase the number of programs about minority groups to create a platform for their voices. KBS should report more local arts and cultural activities, promote cultural education, and provide community activities and healthcare information. In addition, the program segments during different time periods can be planned in detail to target particular ethnic groups. These steps would all secure KBS’s professional broadcasting position in Kaohsiung city.

That means citizens participation is important to make immeasurable contribution of media. In terms of the program content formulation, KBS should strengthen its reporting of local arts and cultural activities to propagate the traditional culture. KBS should also report and prepare specific seminars for community cultural activities in the Kaohsiung area. Moreover, KBS should actively introduce medical resources to the public, provide health care advocacy, provide updated medical information, address various types of leisure tourism, catering services, and provide scientific, technological, and legal information. KBS could become the defendant of Kaohsiung’s local culture and not only promote the local culture but also protect the community and historical sites. KBS should define a clear market segment apart from the commercial radio stations and establish its unique style. KBS should learn how to attract its audience and improve its marketing strategy from the successful programs of commercial radio stations to shape its new image.

It is necessary to understand that the primary function of broadcast media is to provide services to the public. The public radio station not only integrates various social resources to solve community problems and protect civil rights, but it can also offer resources to help the government and relevant organizations to develop policy and help the public maximize their welfare. Broadcasters create public affairs programs and invite experts to discuss different public-related

topics to suggest improvement measures, thereby using the power of the community to maintain social order and social stability. Using broadcast media to report and comment on public policies, a radio station develops a form of social movement to protect the national interest.

Due to the quantitative and qualitative differences in the research methods, one limitation of this study is the lack of statistical evidence. However, the case study of KBS, supplemented by the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, shows both macroscopic and comprehensive thinking as a qualitative study. The other limitation comes from KBS its own.

There are only two kinds of radio stations in Taiwan, one is KBS and the other one is TBS (Taipei Broadcasting Station). Then TBS cannot really operate because of the marketing position problem. There are not multi-cases to compare with KBS, but this study of KBS can be the good case to those broadcasting stations belonging to government. The significance of this study is that it confirms the positive value behind the existence and value of public radio stations. Through the radio stations' marketing position, strategies for serving the public interest, and program formulation, this study established a new reference for the operation and management of public radio stations.

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