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## **Officials' Accountability Performance on Hong Kong Talk Radio:**

### **The Case of the *Financial Secretary Hotline***

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Since the 1990s, radio and television audience participation talk shows have attracted much research attention around the world. By allowing common people to share their views and experiences and even directly challenge the discourses of experts or politicians, some scholars have argued that talk shows can potentially expand the space of expression for common people in the mediated public sphere (Herbst 1995; Leurdijk 1997; Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Page and Tannenbaum 1996).

But similar to press conferences and news interviews, talk shows are also staged events. The seeming spontaneity and authenticity of audience participation are constructed through the media's programming practices and the actors' discursive practices. Therefore, we need to understand the significance of audience participation in relation to issues such as how the program set up configures the conversation and what informal rules govern the ongoing talk (Carpentier 2001; Giles 2002; Wood, 2001; Simon-Vandenberg 2007). More broadly, talk shows should be analyzed within multiple layers of contexts (van Dijk 1998: 211-227), including the socio-political context at large and the media system in place.

Based on the above premises, this chapter analyzes the *Financial Secretary Hotline* (*FSH* hereafter) in Hong Kong, a program broadcast annually on the day after the government budget announcement. Ideally, *FSH* should provide opportunities for citizens to

directly question the attending Financial Secretary (FS) of the government, whereas the FS can use the occasion to perform his accountability to the public. But to what extent did callers have the chance to interrogate the FS? How did the FS perform? What roles did the host play in the conversations? Overall, what kind of accountability performance was produced?

This chapter tackles these questions by analyzing three episodes of *FSH*. We begin by discussing talk radio as a stage for Hong Kong government officials' accountability performance and describing the set up of *FSH*. It is followed by an analysis of the conversations in the show. We return to discuss Hong Kong officials' accountability performance through talk radio in the concluding section.

### **Talk Radio and Accountability Performance**

Phone-in talk radio existed in Hong Kong for decades. The public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) has produced call-in shows since the 1970s (Ngan 2003). The colonial government saw the medium as an important source of information about “public opinion” and hence monitored it on a daily basis. Yet the prominence of talk radio grew substantially only in the mid-1990s as the society became politicized through the scheduled transfer of sovereignty in 1997 and the advancement of institutional democratization (Kuan 1998). Besides, Hong Kong's imminent return to China has generated media self-censorship (Lee 1998). A channel for citizens to voice their criticisms toward the government thus gained added value in a seemingly constricting public sphere.

In fact, survey research has shown that the phone-in program audience in Hong Kong tends to be more pro-democracy and anti-government (Lee 2002, 2007). Meanwhile, professional journalists also held high regards of public affairs talk radio. A journalist survey in 2001 found that 68.7% of respondents selected “radio programs” as the “most representative channel” for public opinion expression (Lee, Chan and So 2003).<sup>1</sup> Moreover,

journalists who regarded “monitoring the government” as an important media function were more likely to regard radio program as the most representative channel. It suggests that talk radio was (and still is) an important institution of “watchdog journalism” in the city. Indeed, some popular talk radio hosts consciously saw themselves as advocates rather than “neutral and professional” media personnel (Ma and Chan 2006). Moreover, the news media often report on the criticisms voiced by the hosts and/or the citizen-callers, thus amplifying the criticisms and giving them wider circulation.

Talk radio’s rising prominence has compelled the government to take the medium even more seriously. Since the mid-1990s, government officials have shown an increasing willingness to attend radio talk shows. Official attendance in talk radio often became mini-news-events. This development further enhanced the medium’s prominence.

It should be noted that, after the Asian financial turmoil in 1997, Hong Kong has experienced years of economic decline. Together with other recurrent social and political crises, public support for the government was low. There were strong calls for improving governmental accountability (Ku 2001). The emphasis on “accountability” was so strong that, when the government decided to develop a new quasi-cabinet system in 2002, the new system was dubbed the “accountability system.”

However, as many local commentators pointed out, as long as the Chief Executive of the government remained undemocratically elected and the legislature remained politically weak, accountability is far from being guaranteed by institutional mechanisms. In this situation, officials’ and politicians’ performance of accountability becomes even more important. Here, accountability performance simply refers to actions undertaken by politicians which aim at projecting an image of oneself being accountable to public opinion. The most common examples of accountability performance by Hong Kong officials include the issuing of public apologies when official mistakes are publicized and the attendance of public forums. Such

accountability performance, obviously, is mostly mediated: officials perform their accountability in and/or through the mass media.

Then, to what extent officials' mediated accountability performance has helped them maintain an image of being accountable? Hitherto, opinion polls have shown that local people's evaluation of the "accountability system" remained negative: A poll in March 2009 showed the system getting a rating of only 2.69 out of a seven-point scale.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, officials' accountability performance has not succeeded in shaping people's perception.

This chapter does not provide a comprehensive analysis of all kinds of officials' accountability performance in Hong Kong. But the above provides the broad context for our following analysis, which focuses on officials' performance on talk radio. The findings should generate insights for us to understand the characteristics and limitations of government officials' mediated accountability performance.

### **The Set up of *Financial Secretary Hotline***

As mentioned earlier, top government officials started to participate more actively in talk radio since the late 1990s. A routine was developed such that the Chief Executive would attend call-in talk shows produced by the city's three radio broadcasters after his policy address, whereas the FS would also attend call-in shows after his budget announcement. In earlier years, the three broadcasters produced their own shows. The officials had to go onto a "talk radio circuit" after the major policy announcement.

As Hong Kong was plagued by serious economic and social problems after the Asian financial turmoil, officials often had to endure severe public criticisms in radio talk shows. In 2003, then Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa decided not to attend talk radio after his policy address. The practice resumed only in 2006 by the new Chief Executive Donald Tsang. Yet Tsang also established a new practice: he asked the three broadcasters to join a single radio

show. The *Chief Executive Q&A*, originally produced only by RTHK, became a joint program. The *FSH* followed suit in 2007.

It does not entail that the government was trying to exert heavy-handed control of the show. As part of this study, we interviewed Vincent Wong of *Commercial Radio* (CR) Ka-wing Leung of *RTHK*, and Yim-ming Kwok of *Metro Radio* (Metro), who were the hosts of the joint *Chief Executive Q&A* and *FSH* from year 2007 to 2009. All three perceived the change to a joint program format as primarily a result of efficiency concern. In addition, Vincent Wong opined that the government's approach to attending talk radio has been largely "reactive": they knew that they had to attend the shows to face the public, and yet they wanted to finish the task with minimal fuss. In fact, both Wong and Leung stated that there was very little interaction between the hosts and the FS before the program started.

Nevertheless, the change to the joint program format does have one important consequence: the show is now hosted by three people from different organizations. It meant a relatively low level of pre-program communication among the hosts. As a usual practice, the hosts would separate the 90-minute program into three 30-minute sections. Each host was "in charge" of one section, though the other hosts can still join the discussion. Besides, given the different market positions and target audience of the three radio broadcasters,<sup>3</sup> it is unsurprising that the hosts did not share the same view regarding their role. Leung of RTHK and Kwok of Metro were more adamant that they were mainly "traffic controllers." Vincent Wong, in contrast, saw a larger degree of freedom for the host to "speak on behalf of the common citizens."

The *FSH* typically received hundreds of calls, while only about 20 callers would actually speak on air. Procedurally, a team of workers would receive calls and record the callers' surnames and the topics they wanted to discuss. According to the hosts, callers were selected by the program producer mainly based on programming concerns, e.g., whether the topic

fitted into the flow of the program, whether the caller seemed to be articulate, etc. But the hosts practically knew nothing substantive about a caller when a live conversation starts.

In sum, *FSH* has a number of basic characteristics, e.g., having three hosts from three organizations, having a huge number of interested callers and yet limited air time, the unscripted nature of the callers' opinions, etc. We should keep these characteristics in mind when analyzing the conversations in the program.

### **Data and Method**

The following analysis covers three episodes of *FSH* from 2007 to 2009. Our preliminary analysis of the program led us to focus particularly on the role of the hosts. We posit that the hosts were engaging in conversation management during the program. By conversation management, we mean a range of discursive practices carried out by the hosts which aimed at producing a conversation which is appealing to the program listeners. Although such conversation management might be motivated mainly by concerns of program quality and appeal, it is likely to have implications on issues such as whether and how the FS' face was threatened or protected, and how criticisms toward the government were articulated and/or evaded. These issues, in turn, have implications on the characteristics of the talk show as a platform for officials' accountability performance.

Our analysis does not aim to study the use of a specific linguistic device or address a specific issue in conversation analysis. Rather, we aim at uncovering the main features of the talk radio conversations in order to provide an account of the hosts' conversation management. Our approach is inductive, and our interpretation is informed by insights developed in research on political interviews, talk radio discourse, and conversation analysis in general. More specifically, after going through the episodes, we find that the concept of participation framework (Goffman 1981) can serve as a useful basis to structure the

presentation of our analysis. Therefore, the next section begins by discussing the show's basic participation framework. We then focus on the hosts' practices in the subsequent sections.

While our analysis was based on the Cantonese transcripts, only the translated transcripts, using a convention adopted from Hutchby and Woolfitt (1998), are provided below (see Appendix A). Specific Cantonese lexicons are mentioned when needed. Also, the English transcripts are relatively simple as the complete set of fine-grained transcription conventions based on Gail Jefferson cannot be fully applied to the English translations of original Cantonese transcripts: e.g., original dysfluencies are removed and only some key turn-taking information is marked (e.g., latching, interruptions, simultaneous utterances). This is based on considerations of presentational clarity and pertinence to the present analytic purpose.

### **The Basic Participation Framework**

The three episodes of *FSH* all began by the hosts asking the FS questions about the government budget. The first caller would be on air a few minutes after the program began. Understandably, the caller usually addressed the FS as s/he spoke. If the FS responded directly to the caller, the conversation could become a two-person dialogue, with the hosts being only ratified overhearers. Yet the program's first main characteristic is the general absence of such direct official-citizen dialogue. Extract 1 is the only instance of an extended official-citizen dialogue in the episodes analyzed. It was the first caller in the 2007 *FSH*:

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(Extract 1, *FSH* 2007)

FS: Financial Secretary; K: Kwok of *Metro Radio*; L: Leung of *Radio Television Hong Kong*; W: Wong of *Commercial Radio*; C: Caller

T1 C: Good morning. About your budget, I'd like to raise a small question.  
Now the economy is good, you cut taxes? Want to ask Secretary, when



the economy is not good, what would you do?

T2 FS: Mister Chan, our [mid-term budget this time--

T3 C: [You, no, no, you don't have to answer me: I'm just  
a bit worried

T4 FS: Oh {laugh}

T5 C: Ok, [we have so much reserve, wh-

T6 FS [but I do have an answer

T7 L: >He hasn't answered yet, and you [say there's no need to answer you<

T8 C: [Why don't we use the reserves on  
infrastructure projects, such as the Hong-Kong-Shenzhen Railway, why  
don't we build one more railway to Shenzhen directly, increase our  
transportation speed, [increase our

T9 FS: [We have, we have this railway, Mister Chan

T10 C: >You use the West Rail<=

T11 FS: =No. It's the case right now {.....} but we're seriously considering  
whether [to build

T12 C: [the government's serious consideration may be realized ten  
years later. And also, why not building a cruise pier more quickly,  
Queen Mary Second has to stay at the Kwai Chung Container Pier=

T13 FS: =You certainly haven't read my article yesterday {laughter from  
hosts} We will finish building the first terminal of the cruise pier  
in two-o-one-two

T14 C: Two-o-one-two?

T15 FS: Yes.

T16 C: This is only two-o-o-seven, Secretary [and then there's one thing--

T17 W: [This year the  
Hong-Kong-Shenzhen Western Corridor will open, Mister Chan. And there  
also will be a walkathon. So you can join the walkathon and walk before  
the cars use it, Mister Chan {Laughter from the FS}

T18 K: Ok. Let's listen to {.....}

---

The caller seemed to have violated certain conversational rules and politeness norms. He interrupted the FS twice (T2/T3 and T11/T12). His indication at T3 that he did not need an answer violated basic conversational norms – even if his question is a criticism phrased as a rhetorical question, he should still have allowed the FS to answer the criticism. Similarly, the caller criticized the FS at T12 for acting slowly. Yet he immediately moved onto another question, depriving the FS of the chance to answer. The FS apparently regarded the caller as a “problematic case.” At T8, the caller asked whether a cross-border railway can be built. The FS interrupted and stated that there was already such a railway, implying that the caller was missing important facts. At T13, the FS again attempted to cast the caller as uninformed by pointing out that the caller missed some publicized information.

Although the conversation captured in Extract 1 is primarily a caller-official dialogue, the hosts’ conversation management can already be seen at two moments of host intervention. The first came at T7. Before the intervention, the caller has put the FS into an awkward position by asking a question and refusing to listen to an answer. Leung explicitly pointed out the unreasonableness of the caller’s behavior, thus saving the FS’s face. The second host intervention was at T17, where Wong of CR took the initiative to end the call. Although Wong’s speech began at arguably a transition relevant place in the caller’s speech, hence it was strictly speaking not an interruption, we can still argue that Wong cut short the caller’s contribution by intervening at the first transition relevant place in the caller’s speech. Content-wise, Wong’s suggestion about the walkathon was sarcastic. Given the FS’s earlier attempts to cast the caller as ignorant, Wong’s suggestion can be understood as implying that the caller had better join charity walk than talking about public affairs.

We will analyze the hosts’ management further later. The point here is that the program’s typical conversational flow does not involve a direct FS-caller dialogue. Instead, the hosts typically collected questions by receiving two or three calls consecutively before giving FS

the floor, as in Extract 2.

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(Extract 2, FSH 2007)

T1 C1: Yes I want to say something, that's about wine tax, I like wine too, drink both red wine and beer, [so=  
T2 FS: [Yes,  
T1' C1: =I think the tax reduction cannot help all classes in the society{.....}  
establish a fund, so it can provide healthcare benefits to people=  
T3 L: =So are you saying that reducing alcohol tax is meaningless?  
T4 C1: **Yes**, [( )  
T5 L: [Ok, thanks to Mister Chan first. But some people treat alcohol as fuel. When there's no alcohol, there's no power {FS laughs}.  
Good morning Mister Hung.  
T6 C2: Good morning, Secretary Tang, hosts.  
T7 FS: [Good morning Mister Hung.  
T8 C2: [I have two questions {.....}  
T9 FS: Do you have to pay salary tax?  
T10 C2: {.....}  
T11 FS: Oh  
T12 L: How does oil tax relate to you Mister Hung  
T13 C2: Because I work in transportation  
T14 L: Work in transportation,  
T15 C2: Yes, {.....}  
T16 L: Ok. Thanks to the two callers. Wine tax, oil tax, Secretary.

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Two topics were collected. Caller 1 expressed an opinion about the alcohol tax, while also venturing into healthcare. Leung's question at T3 refocused the issue on alcohol tax and summarized Caller 1's view into one single sentence. After Caller 1 acknowledged Leung's summary, Leung moved onto another call. After a brief dialogue between Leung and Caller 2,

in which the FS also posed a question, Leung ended the call by thanking *both* Callers 1 and 2, thus suggesting that it would be time to turn to the FS for his responses. Leung turned to address the FS by simply naming the two topics.

As Extract 2 illustrates, the conversations on *FSH* were often broken down into a host-caller dialogue and a host-official dialogue (FS's intervention in the host-caller dialogue was rare). Practically, this flow helps the hosts to maintain control of the conversation. Moreover, the format of "collecting questions" was probably mandated by the huge number of calls the program received. In a host-caller dialogue without the FS, the hosts can better control the length of each caller's contribution, especially by deciding when to end it. In fact, both host-caller dialogues in Extract 2 were brief. Besides, letting the FS to answer multiple questions at once might also save time. And since the callers were already disconnected when the FS took the floor, the callers could not ask follow up questions. We will further discuss some of these points below. Here, suffice it to say that the format of "collecting questions" makes it easier for the hosts to shorten the contribution of each caller, and hence allows a larger number of callers to speak.

But what are the consequences of this conversational flow? In her study of a community meeting in which the format of "collecting questions" was adopted, Llewellyn (2006) states that "it is difficult to imagine a stronger way of minimizing 'debate' than precluding direct interaction, inserting conversational space between the turns of participants and ensuring any two people can only ever 'interact' once" (p. 621). In this situation, the speaker to whom the questions are directed would face relatively weak conversational constraints. This argument is largely applicable to *FSH*. In Extract 2, the FS's final answers were separated temporally from the two calls. However, the FS seldom proactively reformulated the callers' questions. Rather, as the next section shows, reformulation was often done by the hosts.

## Shaping Callers' Contributions

Although the callers of *FSH* were presumably free to express their views, their contributions were shaped by how the hosts interacted with them. In fact, not only were the questions co-constructed by the callers and the hosts, the hosts also occupied the position to “finalize” the gist of the questions. Three host practices are particularly important in this regard: Asking questions, reformulation, and dismissal.

### Asking questions

The hosts of *FSH* often put forward simple questions to the callers, such as yes-no questions (T3 in Extract 2) or questions requesting simple and basic facts. It does not mean that the host would always limit the caller's responses to a simple answer. But it remains an important point that the hosts' questions were typically phrased not as explicitly open-ended (i.e., an open-ended question such as the one at T12 in Extract 2 belonged to the minority). The hosts' questioning strategy probably had the aim of allowing the caller to have more than one turn while also maintaining the brevity of the conversation. But regardless of intention, the hosts' questions play a crucial role in shaping the caller's questions, as in Extract 3.

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(Extract 3, *FSH* 2009)

T1 C: Secretary, I just listened to you talking about those high tech things. I'm a middle-aged person. It's difficult for me to find jobs. You always say your budget aims at protecting employment, but did you ever see the employment classification at the Labor Department. Those low education, low skill people, their pay is eighteen dollars per hour. He has a raise a family of four {.....} Transportation is also expensive, and >the government is unable to negotiate a price reduction with the transportation companies<. Even when the government is the biggest shareholder, it cannot make the company give discount to some people,

and [you=

T2 W: [The disabled for instance

T1 C: =talked about the high tech people. They are hi:ighly educated. Isn't it the case that we middle-aged, low employment, and lowly educated people don't have to work? [I don't want to get social security money

T3 W: [Mister Cheung, which occupation are you in? Mister Cheung which occupation are you in?

T4: C: I'm now a driver.

T5 W: Age?

T6 C: I'm forty something, close to fifty.

T7 W: How many hours do you work each day?

T8 C: I drive fourteen hours each day.

T9 W: Wow.

T10 C: I want to ask the Secretary. Have you and the government ever thought about how dangerous it is for a driver to drive fourteen hours on the road? That maximum working hours thing, can it guarantee our safety?=  
 T11 L: =[Ok. Thanks Mister Cheung.=

T12 C: [( )

T11 L: =Thanks Mister Cheung. Regulations on minimum wage and maximum working-hours, will we have them or not?

---

In this extract, the caller actually raised several issues and implicitly criticized the FS for neglecting the lower classes. However, Wong's questions at T3, T5 and T7 (all were questions requesting simple facts) elicited the information that the caller was a driver working 14 hours per day. It was only after this fact was produced that the caller mentioned the issue of maximum working-hours legislation. At T11, another host jumped in to end the call. He picked up the caller's utterances at T10 and defined the call as addressing minimum wage and maximum working-hours laws. In other words, the host reformulated the caller's utterances by finalizing the gist of the question. We discuss reformulation further below. Here, we see

that the questions posed by one host elicited the callers' utterances, which were then picked up by another host to finalize the gist of the caller's utterances into a synoptic question.

### Reformulation

As mentioned, given the basic participatory framework and the format of "collecting questions," the hosts occupied the position to finalize the shape and content of the questions to the FS. As Extract 3 illustrated, a host-caller dialogue can end with the host's reformulation. Reformulation is a widely examined tactic in broadcast conversations (e.g., Becker, 2007; Wood, 2001). In some cases, an interviewer may reformulate an interviewee's discourse to confront and challenge the interviewee. But in *FSH*, the hosts reformulated the callers' questions for the FS to answer, and the reformulation often rendered the callers' views less face-threatening. In Extract 3, the host's reformulation excluded the caller's criticisms toward the FS's negligence of the lower classes and the government's incapability to negotiate with public transportation companies. In fact, the FS did not answer the criticisms in his turn after T11. He only gave a general answer on the government's provision of re-training to people. Extract 4 provides a similar example:

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(Extract 4, *FSH* 2008)

- T1 C: My opinion is that this budget is very short-sighted. Everything is one-off, bringing short-term pleasure. There is no spending on the real problems in Hong Kong, such as inflation and the lack of competitiveness. Why are there so many "three-nots" or low income people? Because many people lack competitiveness. Why doesn't the government do something to let all Hong Kong people to have the ability to compete with others who come to Hong Kong to work?
- T2 K: Um. Secretary, do you think we're not working urgently enough on the aspect of competitiveness?
-

The caller was highly critical. She explicitly labeled the budget “short-sighted” and used the phrase “three nots” (*saam mou*), which was coined by the media during the time to refer to people who do not own properties, pay taxes, or get welfare money – these people did not benefit from any of the measures in the 2008 budget. Hence the phrase had strong adversarial connotations. In contrast, the host reformulated the caller’s utterances into a much less critical question. She employed the collective pronoun “we,” implying that enhancing competitiveness is something which the government and citizens have to work on together. The question also assumed that the government was already working on the matter: the issue was only whether the work was being done “urgently enough”.

Moreover, the host’s question was devoid of references to specific groups of people. With the question “generalized,” the FS’s answer (after T2) focused on the government’s overall expenditure on education. The focus on education can be considered as rather irrelevant to the plight of the low income people. Yet it sufficed as a response to the host’s “generalized” question.

It does not mean that the hosts’ reformulation would always reduce the questions’ critical edge. After all, many callers’ opinions did not contain face-threats. Nevertheless, when a caller was critical, the overall tendency was that the criticism would be toned down or omitted through reformulation.

### Dismissal

In his analysis of talk radio discourse, Hutchby (1996, 1999) emphasizes that the caller occupies the first position in the conversational sequence, whereas the hosts occupy the second position and can simply criticize the callers’ views. The hosts in *FSH* also occupied the second position. Yet they were not supposed to respond substantively to the callers, since



the FS was the main “respondent.” Nevertheless, there were still occasions when the hosts perceived the callers as “unreasonable” and rebut the callers.

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(Extract 5, *FSH* 2009)

- T1 C: Yes. You talk about this re-training. I have been trained in many occupations, but I still can't find a job. {.....} Those short-term contracts are meaningless, only three months, half a year, useless. {.....} If this continues, let me teach you a method, the most convenient method, no need to spend money or do other things, give everyone a bag of charcoal, let them do it themselves.
- T2 W: Missus Lee, no matter what, suicide isn't a good method. We should look forward, look into the future. Actually I think, [Missus Lee
- T3 C: [You don't have money, look into what?]
- T4 W: =But Missus Lee, in fact you mentioned short-term contract, so you think short-term contract cannot resolve the problem
- T5 C: Absolutely cannot resolve [the problem].
- T6 W: [Absolutely cannot resolve the problem. Secretary, absolutely cannot resolve the problem, Missus Lee said.]
- 

The caller was emotional, and the most “radical” comment was her suggestion to the government to give everyone a bag of charcoal to commit suicide. Although the suggestion could be taken as a hyperbole, the host interpreted it literally. He offered a relatively polite rebuttal at T2: by using the collective pronoun “we,” the host suggested that he and the caller were on the same side. Yet the caller still rebuked the host by interrupting the host’s talk. The host then reformulated the caller’s view as one about the usefulness of the short-term contracts offered by the government. The caller acknowledged the host’s reformulation, but marked the intensity of her feeling with the word “absolutely.” In fact, the host seemingly

knew what the caller would say once the caller began the utterance. The host was already starting his turn (T6) before the caller finished the sentence. The host also used the repetition of the caller's utterance to end the call. Then, he repeated the caller's utterance yet again, putting it forward for the FS to respond to.

Extract 6 provides another example of the hosts rebutting a caller. In this case, the hosts did not even bother to reformulate the caller's contribution:

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(Extract 6, *FSH* 2009)

- T1 C: {.....} you: just mentioned those twelve thousand jobs. I think I'm most likely not entitled. Even if I'm willing to lower my expectation to apply, what can be said is, all people understand, five out of ten of those government jobs are just put forward to show people. The fact is that they're all internal transfers. So opportunities are re:ally not that ma:ny=
- T2 W: =This can't be proven.
- T3 C: I experienced this. You don't have an interview. {.....} I'm skeptical about those twelve thousand jobs. First, if I'm willing to lower my expectation, would I have a chance? Second, [even if it's really
- T4 W: [Miss Chan, you're so good at talking, you may write three letters. Send them separately to Metro Radio, Radio Television Hong Kong, and Commercial Radio. We hear you speak so fluently, we'll consider you
- T5 K: At least an interview
- T6 W: Next one. Miss Wong, Good morning.
- 

The caller was critical toward the FS from the beginning of the call. Then, at T1 in Extract 6, she put forward a "conspiracy theory" about whether the jobs advertised by the government really existed. Wong rebutted by latching onto the end of the caller's speech. Yet

the caller insisted on her “theory” at T3. Wong interrupted and ended the call, while sarcastically suggesting that the caller would be a good job applicant for a radio station. Another host concurred with the sarcastic remark (T5). Wong then turned to another call without summarizing what the caller said.

As Extracts 5 and 6 illustrate, the hosts would occasionally take the initiative to criticize those callers they regarded as “irrational.” Consequentially, the FS did not have to respond to some of the viewpoints and questions which were rhetorically or content-wise most challenging and radical.

### **Host-Official Interactions**

With the most radical comments and strongest criticisms toned down or even dismissed, the FS seemed to have been given an easy ride. Of course, the hosts did not eliminate all confrontations. As discussed earlier, talk radio in Hong Kong is regarded by many as having a monitoring function, and officials are expected to perform their accountability through facing people’s critiques. Hence the hosts might still put forward questions which at least appeared to be challenging the FS.

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(Extract 7, *FSH* 2008)

T1 L: Secretary, our general education is doing well, so many citizens have learnt critical thinking, and >they’re a bit harsh when looking at things<. Like today some comments from the newspapers, some headlines say “you give out money to the extent that it becomes chek,” *chek* as in chek jih and chek as in yuhk chek; there are newspaper headlines saying that you empty your pockets once and for all, and there are newspaper headlines saying that you haven’t moved out of the shadow of Donald Tsang and created a clear image for yourself. What do you think about these products of critical

- thinking?
- T2 FS: I think, we don't mind criticisms. I've been working in the government for twenty five years, got used to it. {.....}
- T3 L: About that so-called shadow of Donald Tsang. What response do you have?
- T4 FS: I think I'm a bit taller than Donald Tsang. {others laugh}
- 

A few things can be noted. First, similar to the findings of Clayman and Heritage (2002a) regarding the journalistic interview, the hosts of *FSH* often put forward critical questions by quoting others, thus distancing themselves from the questions. Leung, in Extract 7, quoted a number of newspaper headlines. Second, right from the beginning, Leung has qualified the question by saying that Hong Kong people might be “a bit harsh.”

Third, it took a lengthy turn for Leung to finish the question. In an analysis of how journalists formulate questions in press conferences, Clayman and Heritage (2002b) argue that the formulation of lengthy and complex questions is a sign of journalistic initiative and an indicator of adversarialness. In Extract 7, however, the question's complex formulation actually reduced the adversarialness. The lumping of the headlines blurred the question focus, as none of the criticisms was singled out. The FS, at T2, thus opted to treat the question as asking him what he thought about the fact that criticisms existed, instead of what he thought about the specific criticisms. The FS, in one sense, has evaded the criticisms the host cited, but the evasion was facilitated by the host's question formulation.

Certainly, Leung highlighted one specific criticism toward the FS at T3. But even in this case, the cited criticism was softened by the phrase “so-called” (*so waih*). Besides, the question was put forward in an open manner. By saying “what response do you have,” the FS could answer by giving *any* response. The FS, indeed, decided to employ humor by taking the phrase “Donald Tsang's shadow” literally. The hosts responded by laughing, and they did not

continue to push FS to answer the question more directly.

Therefore, even as the hosts were seemingly playing their monitoring role, they did so by maintaining a high level of politeness.

Besides engaging in a conversation with the FS at the program's beginning, the hosts also had to engage the FS after the FS responded to the citizens' opinions. On one hand, it was important for the hosts to ask follow-up questions, especially since the callers were already cut-off. But on the other hand, the host would probably feel that it is inappropriate for them to take up too much air time. As a result, the host-official dialogues were generally brief. In the following example, a caller has, preceding the extract, criticized the government's "slow response" to the financial meltdown and questioned if the major officials deserved their high salaries. In his main response turn, the FS discussed how the government has helped the business sector, but he did not address the issues of the speed of governmental response and officials' salaries. The hosts, in this case, pursued the matters further:

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(Extract 8, FSH 2009)

T1 W: Secretary, but there're indeed citizens who think that your reaction is not quick enough; the performance was a bit unsatisfactory. What promises can you make? That is, can the coordination and communication among the officials be even quicker? Because citizens, especially Hong Kong people, hope that everything is quick. What can you promise?

T2 FS: {.....}

T3 L: The caller raised a question about the high officials' salaries. In fact you have responded to this in the FS online forum. You said even if all high officials' salaries were removed, that would constitute a very small percentage of public expenditures; it wouldn't help. But indeed many citizens say that, if high officials

can reduce their salaries, showing that they are together with the citizens in facing these difficult times, it can generate support for the government from the citizens. That's actually a low cost measure to generate much benefit. >In fact, has there been any discussion among yourselves? <

T4 W Nominally--

T5: L Have you discussed? Actually--

T6: FS: I've also heard of these voices. But I believe that citizens hope we can do practical things {...}=

T7 L: =Among the ten or so top officials, have you ever discussed this question about your salaries?

T8 FS: I think this is a matter which we keep an eye on constantly because many citizens have expressed views on this. I believe we're all paying attention to the question.

T9 L: The next caller is Mister Lee. Good morning.

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In this extract, both T1 and T3 emphasized that the question was something many citizens have in mind. Besides, both questions were arguably more elaborated than they needed to be. The question at T1 could be ended at the point when Wong put forward the question "what promises can you make" for the first time. Instead, he offered a possible answer, i.e., "can the coordination and communication among the officials be even quicker?" Moreover, the word "even" implied that the government's response was already quick. Then, Wong cited Hong Kong people again and suggested that people's view might be based merely on their preference for "quickness." These additional elaborations work to reduce the adversarial-ness of the question.

Similarly, the question at T3 could have been posed more directly. But Leung first cited the FS's earlier response to the question of salary reduction. Although Leung expressed disagreement with the FS's earlier response, he finally refrained from posing the more

confrontational question of whether high officials' salaries should be reduced. Instead, he merely asked whether the officials discussed the issue. Therefore, at both T1 and T3, the unnecessary elaboration seemed to work as a form of circumlocution and a way to reduce the directness of the question. Lengthy questions worked here more as a deferential gesture.

Of course, at T5 the hosts did pose the question in more directly and assertively. It should be noted that such a direct and concise follow-up question was itself a rare exception in the three episodes analyzed. The question seemingly put the FS into a classic situation of communicative conflict (Bull 2003), i.e., while the host's was a yes-no question, both answers seemed to be less than optimal for the FS. If the FS said no, it would have been a sign showing that officials do not care about what citizens think. If the FS said yes, then a can of worms could have been opened. The FS's answer was a classic example of evasion, as it answered the question by redefining it – from whether officials have discussed the matter to whether officials were paying attention.

No matter whether the answer satisfied the hosts, the hosts decided to move on. Notably, the return to callers' calls did not involve the host commenting or summarizing the FS's responses. In fact, this is how the transition from the host-official dialogue back to citizens' calls was typically done in the program. If the sequence from the callers' calls, to the host-caller interactions, and to the host-official dialogue forms a discussion segment, the FS almost invariably had the last words in each segment. In other words, the hosts forfeited the opportunity to reformulate and/or evaluate the FS's answers. The FS's answers were presented as final and definitive.

### **Problems of Accountability Performance on *FSH***

The analysis in the previous sections showed that the hosts of *FSH* played a very important role in managing the program's conversational flow. Their role was much more

substantive than what the notion of “traffic controller” suggests. While the presence of critical and emotional callers tended to threaten the face of the FS, the hosts managed the conversation in ways such that the face-threats were undermined. The hosts tended to undermine or tone down the critical views expressed by some of the callers. Questions were often reformulated to become less threatening or more generalized such that the FS enjoyed a larger degree of freedom in determining how to respond. The overall consequence of much of the hosts’ conversation management, therefore, is the construction of a relatively friendly, respectful, and politically safe conversational space for the FS.

But does it mean that the program structure and the hosts’ practices have helped the FS to perform his accountability to public opinion in a way that will satisfy the listening public? We cannot directly answer this question here, since doing so would require us to examine audience reception. Nevertheless, we believe that our analysis has pointed to certain plausible reasons why common people are likely to remain dissatisfied about the government’s and the official’s accountability even after such performances. It is because the program structure and the hosts’ practices have paradoxically imposed severe limitations on the extent to which the attending FS can perform his accountability.

The situation is paradoxical because the hosts’ conversation management would seem to be working in favor of the FS. However, it is exactly because a “safe space” was created for the attending official so that the official could not perform his accountability properly. Most fundamentally, the calling citizens simply seldom had the chance to directly talk to the FS. Besides, while the hosts’ reformulation of the critical callers’ questions made those questions easier for the FS to answer, the FS’s answers were unlikely to have satisfied the caller. Furthermore, the callers could not provide immediate feedback to the FS. In this situation, the FS’s answers were sufficient only within the most immediate context of the conversation flow itself. The FS could not realize immediately how the society and the media at large



would receive his answers to people's queries.

This problem can be more clearly seen when the conversations on *FSH* are put into the larger context of the news cycle surrounding the budget announcement. As pointed out earlier, top government officials' talk radio attendance often constitutes news events. In the case of *FSH*, despite how the hosts have minimized the face-threatening aspects of the critical callers' questions, there was nothing forbidding the overseeing journalists to report on those critical callers' questions and opinions in ways which were highly negative to the government. Extract 5 has quoted an emotional caller who suggested the government to give every citizen a bag of charcoal to commit suicide. Although the caller was rebuked by the hosts, most newspapers reported the call the next day. Some newspapers even highlighted the "charcoal suggestion" in the headlines. For example, the headline of *Oriental Daily*, the most widely circulated newspaper in the city, read: "Enrage all classes; Phone-in: 'let's give everyone a bag of charcoal.'"

It is beyond this chapter's scope to systematically analyze how newspapers and television news re-present the talk radio discourses. For the discussion here, the important point is that it might actually have been better for the official attending radio talk shows if they had the opportunities to engage with the citizen-callers more directly. It would have been a much more challenging task, but having direct dialogues would have pressurized the FS to be more responsive to the callers' views. If the FS successfully handled the conversations, he would have put forward a more convincing display of official accountability.

In contrast, with the current participation framework and format of "collecting questions," the FS's answers were separated temporally from the callers' questions, while the callers' views were often reformulated by the hosts. The FS enjoyed more freedom to answer the questions in his own preferred ways. But it also meant a higher likelihood for the FS not to directly address the original caller's views and questions. This lack of responsiveness might

then be re-presented and highlighted in news reports on the next day, since the news media were likely to reconstruct the talk radio dialogue by only focusing on what the callers and the FS said (because the hosts were not the newsworthy aspect of the radio show).

Putting our analysis and findings into the larger context of political communication in Hong Kong, this chapter suggests certain difficulties government officials may encounter when they attempt to perform their accountability to the public. Generally speaking, to the extent that such accountability performance is usually mediated, the success or failure of the performance would be shaped by the operational logic of the media. To put it differently, media logic has consequences on the government officials' accountability performance.

## Appendix A

### Symbols used in the transcripts

:	Lengthened word/vowel
=	Latching
<b>Bolded</b>	Words spoken louder
<i>Italicized</i>	Cantonese words
?	Rising intonation
{ }	Contextual information
{.....}	Omitted utterances
[	Overlapping talk
( )	Utterances which cannot be heard clearly
_____	Emphasis
> <	Quickened speech

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Other choices were newspaper forums, government departments, and legislators' offices

<sup>2</sup> "Low score for the accountability system," *Sing Tao Daily*, March 31, 2009, A14.

<sup>3</sup> As a public broadcaster, RTHK's approach to news and public affairs programming is generally more "professionally journalistic." *Metro Radio* focuses relatively more on financial news. *Commercial Radio*, meanwhile, is arguably more populist.