

HARDTalk or money talks?
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COMMENT HARDTalk is a flagship BBC television programme that has gained a large global audience due to its style of tough questioning.

According to its media note, HARDTalk "asks the difficult questions and gets behind the stories that make the news -- from international politician-petra-hardtalkl leaders to entertainers; from corporate decision-makers to ordinary individuals facing huge challenges."

This reputation of independence and fearlessly getting the stories behind the news is now blotted.

On Aug 10, Nicholas Davis Blakemore, BBC planning editor sent an e-mail note to Raja Petra Kamarudin asking if he would be interested in appearing in HARDTalk.

Following confirmation from RPK (readers can read the full correspondence here), the live interview was to have been conducted on Sept 1.

On Aug 29, Hardtalk producer Bridget Osborne informed RPK that the interview was cancelled. This abrupt turnabout is quite unprecedented in the programme's 13-year history. According to Osborne, the cancellation was due to legal concerns.

Since then the BBC has issued a further note in which its Global News senior press officer Peter Connors said in an e-mail reply: "It became clear in our research any comprehensive interview with former Malaysia Today editor Raja Petra would prominently feature issues that are currently the subject of a current court case in Malaysia, which raise issues of defamation."

It is unclear from Connors' e-mail which "current court case" is being referred to.

Even more cryptic is the allusion to "defamation". Who might it be that is likely to be defamed should RPK appear on air?

The BBC explanation is uncharacteristic of its traditional journalism ethos.

In the past, the programme has not been afraid of controversy arising from its choice of personalities and the discussions that arose during the course of their interviews. Surely the programme which prides itself on undertaking meticulous and in-depth research to accompany the interviews would have done its homework on the legal implications before any official invitation was extended by Blakemore to RPK.

Bear in mind that RPK is no suddenly arrived personality. The BBC had previously given press coverage to the Malaysian government's persecution of him, and several times.

Nonetheless, Connors is correct to infer that the topic -- once RPK started hard talking -- may submerge viewers in turbulent waters.

Let's just suppose the Q&A had gone ahead. If 'the news' is a court case as revealed by Connors, what might be 'the difficult questions' asked by Hardtalk to get the real story behind the sandiwara.

If it is the Altantuya murder case, then there is an added dimension. One of the accused was Abdul Razak Baginda who brokered arms deals worth billions of ringgit for the Malaysian Defence Ministry.

A political commentator, Mariam Mokhtar, writing in the Malaysian Mirror speculated on what could have caused BBC to pull the plug. Mariam is sceptical that the British broadcaster would be afraid of legal threats and suggests that the Hardtalk climbdown might be due to something "purely economic" and the pressure coming instead from the British government to protect its arms sales to Malaysia's Defence Ministry.

For now, and until a whistleblower steps forward to provide details which can throw light on the unexpected turn of events, we can only ponder upon the reasons suggested by analysts who have been closely following this astonishing capitulation by Hardtalk.

Whist some of their views may appear to be highly speculative, it is however still inconceivable that the decision was arrived at by the Hardtalk programming staff themselves.

The possibility that higher levels of authority intervened to stop the programme should not be discounted. There is little doubt that if the interview had gone ahead, RPK would have spoken - if asked - at length on the Altantuya murder and his allegation of the Prime Minister's involvement.

To clear the air, it is important for the Malaysian and British governments to issue a statement disclaiming any interference in the matter and for the Hardtalk senior management to be more explicit on what actually went on behind the scenes.

Silence will only lead to further suspicions that a conspiracy has been concocted to stymie RPK in his uncompromising pursuit of justice and freedom for Malaysia.

Meanwhile, there is possibly some deep soul-searching going on even now in the backroom of Hardtalk. The television programme before this had a reputation that was well-earned. Its producers and hosts know that as journalists, they have been doing a good job in upholding the integrity of the profession.

Didn't Connors, the BBC spokesman, also reiterate that all their programmes "adhere to the same strict editorial guidelines which ensure complete editorial independence and impartiality"?

The professional pride of the Hardtalk crew might yet prompt them to come clean on the real reasons why they were denied the chance of giving RPK his airtime to tell the true story.

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