

# The Standard

Established 1949

## A free society must have a free media

THIS week's announcement about a \$2.7 billion deal involving a local English-language newspaper has raised more questions than it has answered.

After a flurry of wheeler-dealing that kept the stock market afire with speculation for days, it has been revealed that Malaysian businessman Robert Kuok has signed an agreement to buy a 34.9 per cent stake in the South China Morning Post publishing group.

But local media-watchers, aware that Kuok also owns a major stake in TVB, are worried that the deal, if it goes through, would concentrate too much power and influence in the hands of one individual.

Is this kind of cross-media ownership in the best interests of Hongkong, they ask. The answer clearly is no.

In many places there are legal restrictions that prevent multi-media ownership. These laws were passed because legislators were aware of the danger that single ownership of various media could lead to control of information and editorial content.

In Australia, cross-media laws introduced in 1986 prevent proprietors from owning television, radio and newspapers in the same city. The laws prohibit a

television company from owning more than 15 per cent of a newspaper in the same city; ownership of more than 15 per cent of more than one broadcasting asset in any city is banned.

A plural democratic society requires a plural media representing all points of view. There is already a sense that the media are too corporate. But these concerns have been heightened by the advent of new technology, including satellite television, which has made the media transnational. National borders are no longer sacrosanct.

Scrutiny of such deals is especially important here in view of the uncertainty in the run-up to 1997.

There is still a chance, it seems, that the deal may not go through. It could be scuppered by media cross-ownership laws set to take effect next year. The government has refused to rule out the possibility that proposed laws banning cross-media ownership would be retrospective.

Laissez-faire Hongkong is known as a place where anything goes - especially for big business. But no one should shed any tears if this particular deal is stymied. This kind of cross-media ownership is clearly not in the best interests of our community.