

ABC Alumni submission

Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

This submission represents the considered views of ABC Alumni, a national community organisation made up of former employees and associates of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in Asia and the Pacific .

ABC Alumni advocates for the ABC's role as an independent and impartial public broadcaster and digital content maker. ABC Alumni is grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Inquiry and would welcome it being published.

This paper reflects the extensive experience and valuable insights of former staff who have worked in the region as foreign correspondents and as program makers. It also draws on evidence given to a Senate committee which in 2017 examined the ABC Board's decision in December 2016 to cut off shortwave broadcasts to parts of the Northern Territory, PNG and the Pacific.

A majority of Senators on the committee rejected the proposed legislation that the ABC should be required to re-establish the cancelled services, saying that it amounted to undue interference in the ABC's independence. However the Senate report is a valuable document for evidence from Pacific leaders and broadcasting experts, some of whom this paper will refer to later.

This submission represents a general response to the issues raised by the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

Executive Summary

The Australian nation and the Australian people need better mechanisms by which they can engage and interact with the many and varied peoples throughout Asia and the Pacific.

Diplomacy, trade, education, tourism and many other spheres of activity depend on reputation and goodwill.

Broadcasting and digital channels are an extraordinarily cost effective way of maintaining and enhancing Australia's reputation and promoting engagement at many levels, in what it is an increasingly competitive international arena.

The ABC has an 80 year tradition of international broadcasting and enjoys a high reputation throughout the region.

The Federal Government's cut to the ABC's funding in 2014, abrogating an election promise, has had a serious negative impact on the ABC's international services as well as its domestic services. Announced further cuts to the 2018 budget will further weaken the ABC's capacity to fund international services.

The ABC's decision to abandon shortwave services has let down many Pacific Islander communities who relied upon it for independent reliable news, information, education and weather services.

The ABC should be specifically funded by Federal government to re-establish short wave, AM and FM distribution channels, particularly throughout the Pacific where the cost benefit analysis is most stark, but also in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

ABC Alumni endorses the exceptionally well researched paper submitted to the Inquiry by Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific, many of whom are members of ABC Alumni.

We believe the most comprehensive funding model proposed by the Supporters for a comprehensive suite of targeted radio, television and digital services to the regions is factually sound and represents a cost-effective means by which Australian interests can be promoted while at the same time giving the peoples of the region a capacity to engage directly with Australia.

Australian media 'reach'

The Inquiry is required among other things to, 'assess the reach of Australia's media in the Asia Pacific region.'

Australia has invested heavily in radio as a vehicle for news, information and public diplomacy since 1939 at the start of the Second World War.

Over subsequent decades Radio Australia built an enviable reputation for independent, impartial journalism in English and a host of other Asian and Pacific languages. Hundreds of millions of Asians and Islanders gained their first understanding of Australia and the wider world by listening to Radio Australia.

Just one example; the former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid told an ABC function in Sydney in 2002 that he and many of his fellow students learnt English by listening to RA. Not just language was important. It was the content which gave a strong sense of Australian society and democratic values that he came to admire.

Since 1993 there has been sporadic, inconsistent and inadequate government support for international television and more recently digital services to the Asia Pacific region; most recently the disastrous decision in 2014 to abandon the Australia Network contract.

Almost 80 years since ABC radio launched internationally, initially as 'Australia Calling', Australian 'reach' has shrunk dramatically. The Federal Government knows this from diplomatic, trade and intelligence sources. Clearly the time is overdue for the Federal government to develop the vision necessary to extend, not continue to shrink, Australia's 'reach'.

Shortwave 'reach' and why it remains fundamental

Only a few years ago Radio Australia broadcasts on shortwave and relayed through local stations reached every nation member of the Pacific Island Forum.

As the Supporters' submission notes: 'Since 2014, cuts to the ABC transmission has left 10 Pacific Forum nations with no radio service from Australia. Those countries include Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu.'

The Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Charles Salwai said this in a submission to a Senate committee which in 2017 examined the ABC Board's decision, in December 2016, to cut off shortwave broadcasts to parts of the Northern Territory, PNG and the Pacific.

In times of crisis when other forms of media like FM and digital services are damaged or unavailable such communities rely on broadcasts safely transmitted from outside the disaster zone. This is exactly the role Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts played during Cyclone Pam (2015) ... people around our nation relied on Radio Australia's shortwave broadcasts to stay up-to-date about the cyclone's progress and they took the thorough and expert advice on the shortwave service very seriously indeed. It is undoubtedly the case that Radio Australia's shortwave service helped save Ni-Vanuatu lives.

The Senate report heard from a range of Pacific voices who universally exhorted the ABC to reconsider the judgement that shortwave was outdated technology. The following excerpts give a flavour of the submissions.

Perceived neglect of remote communities in the Pacific

2.4 It was argued in evidence that the ABC's decision to cease shortwave services did not reflect the continuing importance of shortwave for communities in remote and isolated areas in the Pacific. Submissions pointed to the limited opportunities for some communities to access radio broadcasts through the internet, mobile phones and via FM transmissions.

2.5 The Pacific Freedom Forum, for example, commented that 'from the Western border of Papua New Guinea, across the PNG highlands and islands, in all but the main centres in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, in Fiji and beyond, people rely on shortwave'. Mr Graeme Dobell, a journalist fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), highlighted that for the people of the South Pacific, shortwave radio is not outdated technology but 'cheap, low tech, resilient, vital in emergencies, and still used beyond the cities'.

2.6 Mr Roger Cragg commented particularly on the use of shortwave in Papua New Guinea and stated:

Shortwave is still the only cost effective method of covering 100% of the population in PNG, the majority of whom live in very remote areas and because of the incredible mountainous terrain, cannot possibly be covered by a VHF broadcast service. Certainly, given a great deal of money, anywhere in the world can have a satellite service, but the grass roots people of PNG do not have money. But they do have battery powered Short Wave receivers and replacement batteries can easily be purchased at the local Trade Store.

2.7 Similarly, Mr David Alford, a former broadcast technician, stated that the international target areas for shortwave transmission were:

...mostly Pacific islands where infrastructure and information availability [can] be poor or non-existent. The availability of power can be erratic in these island nations and susceptible to storm/natural disasters, however with a battery powered radio, transmissions are able to be heard and vital information conveyed..

2.8 Other technologies were seen as providing less available and reliable services in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. The journalist and commentator Dr Alexandra Wake stated that 'in remote places in the Pacific, particularly in Melanesian nations such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, there is no access to an FM signal, limited internet and, where internet is available, it is expensive'. It was also stated that, in many areas, FM signals are delivered through low power FM transmitters which have very limited range and are vulnerable to extreme weather events.

These contributions make the case that shortwave is not outdated technology, but remains extremely relevant. The BBC has launched new shortwave services into Asia including North Korea, as well as across Russia and Africa - the biggest expansion in 50 years. Voice of America is continuing with shortwave in Asia as well as the Pacific. China Radio International is also expanding its shortwave services. What do these broadcasters know that the ABC does not?

Failing the charter

The ABC Charter explicitly requires the Corporation to serve international audiences.

b) to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:

(i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and

(ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs ...

In recent years the ABC has not met its international charter responsibilities, favouring instead the delivery of an extended range of digital services to a host of domestic audiences. This is hardly surprising given the hyper political climate in which the ABC has been a convenient punching bag; it is nonetheless unacceptable.

While the lack of emphasis on international services is regrettably short-sighted and expedient to contend with budgetary problems, ABC Alumni believes that this trend stems from strategic and funding decisions of the Federal government principally the abandonment in 2014, after just one year, of the Australia Network contract, worth roughly A\$22 million a year over 10 years.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop asserted in 2014 that the Australia Network cancellation was a consequence of the ABC failing to meet the terms of the funding agreement with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The ABC explicitly denied the accusation, noting that Australia Network was being seen in 44 countries across Asia and the Pacific and was building an audience.

"Australia Network met all of its contractual obligations and key performance indicators as set out in its contract with DFAT," an ABC spokesperson said in a statement,

"During the first 12 months of the contract the network grew to a potential audience of 144 million in the Asia and Pacific region.

"The termination of the contract led to redundancies within the ABC and had affected the organisation's ability to maintain its international broadcasting responsibilities."

The death of Australia Network had little to do with contractual obligations and everything to do with a concerted anti-government campaign by News Limited on behalf of Sky News which believed that it should have been awarded the original contract.

The point of re-visiting this tortuous history is to highlight the undeniable fact that since 1993 Australia has tried and failed many times to mount a credible television service to Asia and the Pacific. Ironically the most recent model which aired until September 2014 was probably the most professional and cost effective in two decades.

Even so the A\$22 million allocated annually was absurdly inadequate, forcing Australia Network to recycle far too much domestic Australian programming, which was of limited interest to Asian and Islander audiences, in order to fill its schedule. The budget allowed some programming specifically tailored to regional audiences but nowhere near enough.

The Pacific is a vast region with inadequate transport routes and relative expensive airfares. Reporters like the Sean Dorney who had invested 40 years of his life reporting Papua New Guinea and the Pacific for ABC audiences – and was widely recognised because of his skills and longevity - struggled to get funding for island assignments.

Cost-saving also killed a highly productive office in Auckland which had provided original Pacific reporting and tapped into some excellent coverage provided by Radio New Zealand and Television New Zealand. In Asia too staffing and resources were cut, principally in Bangkok, Tokyo and New Delhi.

Australia Network had been co-located with Radio Australia at the ABC in Melbourne. There were obvious editorial, staffing and administrative synergies. The forced collapse of Australia Network and the redundancies which followed had an enormous knock-on effect on Radio Australia. Hence, four years on, its relatively parlous state.

Heightened tensions in the region

In recent months the Federal government has stepped up its engagement with Pacific nations. It has committed to spending about A\$200 million building high speed communications cables linking Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands with Australia.

Funding we're told will be drawn from the international aid budget. Unsurprisingly Vanuatu says that it too wants a new underseas cable connection with Australia, and by the way, it has no plans to allow China to build a naval base.

It is clear that a prime motivation for Australia's determination to build large scale physical communications networks with our neighbours is to deter those countries from being

locked into contracts and onerous loan arrangements with the giant Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei.

China is using state controlled, non-independent media as a tool of engagement along with diplomacy, trade, investment, cultural imperialism and the projection of military power.

This is the context in which Australia needs to immediately re-think its international broadcasting and digital strategy. When those communication cables are built to PNG, the Solomons and potentially Vanuatu their capitals will have good quality internet connections with the world giving Australia the opportunity to deliver independent, non-censored news and information.

ABC Alumni believes the Federal government must make a long term (10 year minimum) commitment to an ambitious plan.

At a minimum it should give serious consideration to the best option proposed by the Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific.

1) Full Asia-Pacific television, radio and digital services \$55-\$75 million per annum. This option would significantly enhance services in the Pacific, Timor-Leste and Indonesia, including establishing new language services. Near-neighbours among the developing nations of ASEAN would be the next priority along with enhanced services for Mandarin-speakers globally, including in Australia. At its most effective (with a budget around \$75 million), this option could include tailor-made services for audiences in India. This option would include a wide range of programs made specifically for Asia-Pacific audiences with priority on news and current affairs (including arts, business, sport, science and technology), new English language-learning programs and children's programs. In any of these options news and current affairs would meet all the ABC's rigorous guidelines for independence. This option would enable the ABC to significantly rebuild audiences in Asia and the Pacific and Australia to achieve its soft power goals and re-establish a significant and respected voice in the region.

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