

The end of ABC shortwave radio broadcasts into the Pacific after 88 years has been criticised as an Australian foreign affairs ‘misstep’.

Foreign Affairs wimped out, saying that ending shortwave was **all the ABC’s own work**. Echoing other submissions, DFAT described ABC Pacific services as:

- a valuable channel for giving the Pacific news, Australian perspectives and content
- advancing Australian public diplomacy: ‘We note that the annual operating cost of the ABC’s former shortwave service was an order of magnitude greater than the combined public diplomacy budgets of all of our Pacific posts.’
- delivering warnings and updates during emergencies.

DFAT said the South Pacific wants shortwave, even though the ABC claims Pacific audiences have ‘moved away’ from shortwave.

The ABC **submission** opposed the Bill to restore shortwave, saying it would:

- impinge on ABC independence by directing the Corporation to use broadcast technologies that have limited and diminishing audiences
- impose significant costs for shortwave
- oblige the ABC to deliver Pacific language services that haven’t been provided in the past.
- Similarly, Mansfield has had a considerable impact on the ABC in relation to international broadcasting. Following his recommendation that ABC funding to both ATV and RA be terminated, the activities and financial allocation to RA have been greatly reduced, and ATV has been sold. Recent developments in the Asia Pacific region and public pressure have, however, caused the government to rethink the international broadcasting issue and to partly restore its commitment to ATV and RA.

SBS report – 31 Jan 2017

Vanuatu's Trade Commissioner to Australia Donald Pelam appealed to the Australian government not to cut the service on YouTube.

"If the ABC shortwave shuts down it will be a really big disaster, for us we really do not want this to happen," he said.

Former ABC Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney called it a "baffling" decision.

"We seem to be turning our back on the Pacific Islands in many, many ways, and this is another example of it," he said.

"(ABC shortwave) has been exceptionally important for Australia diplomatically to have this reliable service go out to all these countries in the Pacific, and to just throw it out the window doesn't make any sense.

"It's not doing Australia any favours at all in those countries out there that have relied on this service for so long."

The national broadcaster announced the end of shortwave in December as foreign minister Julie Bishop toured Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Samoa, and after she released a video stating, "The Pacific (sic), our neighbourhood, our priority".

Ms Bishop said she passed on concerns from Pacific island nations to the ABC.

For eight decades, Radio Australia shortwave service reached out over the millions of square kilometres of the Pacific, from the Indonesian province of West Papua, up to Nauru, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands and east to Cook Islands and French Polynesia.

When the Pacific's first Category Five cyclone hit Vanuatu in 2015, destroying local communications infrastructure, ABC shortwave was a vital link, as it had been during so many other natural disasters in the region.

When military coups censored the media in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, ABC shortwave was there providing independent coverage of events.

The ABC says it is replacing the "outdated technology" and will "expand its digital content ... together with FM services for international audiences".

The decision to cut shortwave was announced in December, giving listeners less than two-months notice of the change.

The ABC admitted it had no data on the usage of the service in the region.

A spokesman said the ABC has since conducted an on-air awareness campaign on Radio Australia, on its website and Facebook pages about where listeners could access it in future.

In the far-flung islands of the Pacific, many people do not have FM reception or affordable internet services.

"For a lot of people, particularly in rural and remote areas, the (shortwave) radio is their primary form of communication about what's going on in their own country and the rest of the world," said Ms Newton Cain.

The Minister is aware of concerns regarding more remote parts of the Pacific where alternative services may not be readily available.

PACMAS Report State of the Media report 2013

Overall radio remains an extremely important broadcast media platform for communication across vast distances and audiences, with most radio consumption occurring on public transport and in other communal spaces. Television retains its importance (especially in urban areas) but the practice of television viewing and infrastructure of television continues to change. For example, there

is a growing trend towards watching television via satellite and cable, a shift that often provides greater access to foreign content but lesser access to local content. Many Pacific countries are also responding to the global switch from analogue to digital, although cost and logistics are mentioned as barriers to full transition. The availability of DVD players and recordable DVDs has also transformed the experience of television viewing. Finally, many newspapers and newsletters are published, and have taken on a new life as they are uploaded and shared online to be read by members of the various Pacific diasporas.

10 Aug 2017 – review report

Issues raised in evidence

Cessation of international shortwave services

2.3 The committee received a number of submissions which raised concerns about the impact of the cessation of the ABC's international shortwave services. These concerns included the perceived neglect of remote communities in the Pacific; the loss of capacity for emergency warning broadcasts; and the potential loss of an avenue for diplomacy and the pursuit of Australia's regional interests in the Pacific. Submitters also disputed the ABC's argument that other technologies now available provide greater access to ABC international broadcasts.

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.¹ Submitters 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...

Submitters also questioned the ABC's assertions that very few listeners accessed Radio Australia's shortwave service.

2.10 The ABC responded to concerns about access to its broadcasts following cessation of shortwave transmissions. The ABC noted that audience behaviour has changed with many listeners using technologies other than shortwave, for example, internet streaming, FM transmissions and radio streamed via mobile phone.⁹ The ABC cited research which indicated that in Papua New Guinea, FM remains the dominant waveband. In addition, the ABC noted that mobile coverage across Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu has jumped from less than half of the population in 2005 to 93 per cent in 2014, the cost of mobile calls declined by one third between 2005 and 2014, and international internet bandwidth jumped over 1500 per cent between 2007 and 2014.

2.11 The ABC's data on audience reach in the Pacific reflects these changes. Mr Michael Millet, Head of Government Relations at the ABC, commented:

...in 2016 ABC Online received more than 5½ million visits and nearly 12 million page views from audiences in the Pacific across mobile and web. Radio Australia and Australia Plus Pacific Facebook accounts have more than 64,000 followers. Radio Australia has 2.1 million podcasts downloaded from the region, including 191,000 for the Pacific Beat program.

2.12 In addition, the ABC noted a citizen access report in Papua New Guinea published in June 2014 which stated that there was a 50 per cent decline in shortwave listenership from 2012 to 2014.

Read more at: <https://www.radioinfo.com.au/news/bill-restore-shortwave-rejected-senate-committee> © Radioinfo.com.au