

Review Committee
Dept of Foreign Affairs & Trade
Dept of Communications & the Arts

Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

Introduction

The Australian shortwave broadcasting service came into active service on December 20, 1939 when the then Prime Minister Robert Menzies spoke these opening words:

‘My purpose is to tell you something about the War. Something about why it is that although we are twelve thousand miles from Europe, we are nevertheless involved in a European war and in full partnership with Great Britain in its conductThe time has come to speak for ourselves.’

We are now almost 80 years removed from that event, and the current parliament is seeking to extinguish that very beacon of information which can reach into the last household of every country, whether ruled by democratic conventions or despotic regimes.

Old Technology vs the New

Is international shortwave broadcasting simply a legacy technology that should be removed from life support because current digital age technologies are alleged to be far superior and more cost effective in their delivery? This is the common view of those who seek to end such services – and I point the finger at vested interests in political parties as well as senior public servants, both bean counters as well as policy people.

The general thrust of those seeking the permanent demise of international shortwave broadcasting – and in this particular case, that of Radio Australia – is that listeners use mobile technologies and computers to access broadcasters around the globe. There is some truth in this usage argument. If you randomly surveyed 1,000 people living in, for example, Seoul, Beijing, Bangkok, and Singapore, you would likely find very few – perhaps less than 1% – who still

listen to shortwave radio. And it's quite true that people gravitate towards the more accessible medium; in populated parts of the world where people live above the poverty line, you will find the market flooded with smartphones. In such cases, mobile Internet is certainly both financially and technologically accessible.

But now imagine that you live in a developing country on less than one or two US dollars a day, in a village without mains power, and your news source on shortwave has suddenly been removed with only a few days' notice. What are your alternatives? To listen over the Internet (a service that requires a subscription you can ill afford), or pay-as-you-go access via an Internet café, perhaps a half-day's walk away. Could you save a year's worth of income to help pay for an Internet-Capable mobile phone that you cannot even charge locally, and then pay a monthly subscription to listen to a broadcast that used to be free over the air? It's highly doubtful. Suddenly, this "accessible technology" seems very much less accessible.

Positive Advantages in Retaining Radio Australia's Shortwave Service

There are particularly obvious advantages of shortwave radio in general over Internet provided services, especially in parts of the world where governments tightly control their country's media:

- **Shortwave radio cannot be easily monitored by a government.** For example, North Korea bans the ownership of shortwave receivers which would otherwise provide a vital lifeline of information about the outside world. Censorship of shortwave radio is comparatively unsuccessful, while the Internet is often subject to total blocking.
- **Shortwave radio is the ultimate free speech medium.** It has no regard for national borders, nor for who is in power – or indeed, not in power - at any given time.
- **Shortwave radio is inexpensive to the listener, because:**
 - Radios are affordable and plentiful;
 - No apps are required, and
 - No subscription fees are needed.
- **Information races over shortwaves at the speed of light.** No buffering is needed, and there is no speed difference between one reception area to another.

- **Shortwave radio works everywhere on the planet.** You don't have to be within a local broadcast footprint or that of a satellite to receive broadcasts. Even in the most impoverished parts of the world, you'll find shortwave radios and batteries that run them. Their "market penetration" surpasses even that of the smart phone.
- **Shortwave radio is a basic, simple technology,** requiring little to no learning curve for use. A simple crystal set can be used to receive stronger signals. There is no such simple solution in the digital world.

Moreover, shortwave radio may be an excellent means of disaster communications over vast areas, where severe weather conditions or earthquakes have disabled mobile phone and internet infrastructure.

How to Safeguard the Future of Radio Australia

Radio Australia has never been in a stand-alone position as has the BBC shortwave service. When rolled up within the ABC or divided among two or more departments to manage within their total funding, it is just too easy to underfund the unwanted child to the point of emasculation. This has to be the first change.

RA ought to be funded very conspicuously by the parliament and brought into the responsibility of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. If need be, funds could be allocated from the foreign aid budget to specifically target those near neighbours who previously enjoyed the service provided by RA. We have witnessed the result of shutting down RA to the near Pacific with Radio China International quickly filling the vacuum. Clearly Chinese foreign policy makers know the value of cultivating friendships – and having third world countries appreciate being 'noticed', something entirely lost on our policy makers in Canberra. We must move quickly to reverse this policy failure before it becomes irretrievably lost. I shudder to think how Sir Robert Menzies would view the travesty his own party has created. The eloquence of his cutting wit would be most unkind.

Chris Bourke