

Submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

Authors:

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Disclosure: The authors are Australian citizens and this is our personal submission. We have no connection with any media other than as consumers and contributors; we are not members of any political party or lobby group.

Release: This submission can be made public.

Background: As consistent and long-time viewers of Australia's TV offerings in Indonesia, we have amassed much knowledge of the fare telecast to the people next door. Duncan Graham subscribes to a home cable service which includes *ABC Australia* along with several other international services delivered in English.

Earlier comment: In 2017 Duncan Graham presented a paper at the *Indonesia Council's Open Conference* at Flinders University. The full text can be found here: <http://indonesianow.blogspot.com.au/2017/07/australia-plus-is-minus-merit.html>

A shortened version was published in *Asian Currents*. See: <http://asaa.asn.au/australia-plus-minus/>

Further analysis can be found on *Pearls and Irritations* here: <https://johnmenadue.com/duncan-graham-australia-plus-unfit-for-export/> and again here: <https://johnmenadue.com/duncan-graham-new-name-old-menu-but-hope-looms/>

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Reason for submission: For many years we have been vigorously and consistently involved in trying to improve Australia-Indonesia relations in both countries.

In these roles we have become increasingly ashamed of the quality of our TV service when compared with those of other nations; we are concerned at the impression it makes on local audiences, and depressed at the lost opportunities to use the medium to engage constructively with our neighbours.

We are both wedded to the concept of public broadcasting and conscious of its value in maintaining democracy. Access to an impartial and trustworthy outside information source is essential to overseas viewers, as commercial networks in Indonesia become more partisan; the government network TVRI, which had a monopoly from 1962 to 1989, is low quality and rarely watched.

It's estimated that 80 per cent of Indonesians still rely on TV for news, a legacy of the Soeharto era when huge sums were spent on relaying government propaganda into every nook of the world's largest archipelago.

Key points

Once we looked out, now we look in.

On 1 July this year our overseas TV channel formerly known as *Australia Plus*, and before that *Australia Network*, quietly changed its purpose and name to *ABC Australia*.

Apart from the absence of commercials this was purely cosmetic. No new directions have been set or contents varied, so comments about *Australia Plus* are relevant to *ABC Australia*.

This was the fifth change in 25 years, bemusing viewers and corroding the brand

The critical questions are: Why does Australia bother to telecast to the Asia-Pacific, and to what end? There are two primary reasons:

Firstly the ABC has a legal duty to broadcast overseas, and secondly because we once proclaimed a moral responsibility to assist other nations to learn more about our country, its people and our values.

Till recently Australia took its international communications responsibilities seriously. The service seemed adequately funded and the programmes were curated for the markets. That is no longer the situation, and as a result we are all diminished.

In brief Australia as presented by *ABC Australia* is becoming more parochial while claiming to be international.

We are retreating from the region when our academics, business leaders, journalists, NGOs and politicians on all sides consistently urge better education, improved communications and closer contact.

These civic-minded citizens stress the social, economic, defence, security and community benefits of developing a strong and enduring relationship.

This retreat is grand scale hypocrisy and offensive to people on both sides of the Arafura Sea.

Discussion

Some background.

Our media presentations to the Asia Pacific were once different. We had pride in our nation's achievements and wanted to share these with the world

For decades Australian governments believed that broadcasting and telecasting into the region was about sowing ideas, informing and influencing, talking intelligently to the wider community, sharing visions.

Radio Australia started in 1939 using shortwave, mainly to counter Japanese propaganda. After the war it became a 'soft power diplomacy tool' in the jargon of Foreign Affairs. Other terms commonly found in the literature include 'globally connected' and 'promotion of Australian values'.

Thousands developed their English skills through RA, particularly during the 1960s and 70s. In Indonesia the authors regularly encounter elderly people who say they relied on RA during the Soeharto New Order dictatorship to tell them what was happening in the world. RA was a trusted source at a time when facts were scarce.

This gave Australia great kudos.

Technology forced necessary changes. Satellites eclipsed land-based transmitters. Rebrands became necessary but the vision remained and the mission expanded.

Australia Television International began transmission in 1993. Nine years later it became *ABC Asia Pacific*.

In 2006 the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer announced another name - *Australia Network*, with funding from Foreign Affairs and Trade plus advertising.

The claims were extravagant: It would reach 10 million homes and 200,000 hotel rooms in 41 countries; maybe one million viewers a month.

Mr Downer said the ABC would run the network offering 'high quality programmes about Australia and its engagement with the region.' Also promised were 'extensive news and current affairs programmes, Australian-produced education, drama, entertainment and lifestyle programmes.' Note the order of priorities.

The Minister included a homely metaphor with his Reithian principles: ‘A key requirement of the service is to provide a credible and independent voice through programmes that present a ‘window’ on Australia and Australian perspectives of the world.’

Australia Network CEO, the late Ian Carroll, added: ‘Our news and current affairs programmes provide more than the headlines – it is quality world class journalism offering a different view from the London and US-centric networks’.

By then there were other windows to peer through. *BBC World*, *France24*, *Al Jazeera*, *NHK (Japan)*, *Deutsche Welle* and other international telecasters were offering vistas grand using serious money.

The French Government is reported to spend US\$117 million a year on *France 24* while Russia’s *RT* channel is believed to have an annual budget of US\$300 million. Now China is expanding its overseas reach with *China Central Television (CCTV)*.

The *Voice of America* budget is US\$218 million, all from government funds. It broadcasts and telecasts in more than 40 languages, including Indonesian.

In 2011 the Australian Labor Government called tenders to run *Australia Network*. The two main hopefuls were the ABC and *Sky TV* which had long campaigned to get the job.

When it seemed Rupert Murdoch’s company would win the contract, the tender process was scrapped and the task given to the ABC.

After the Liberal-National Coalition won government *Australia Network* was turned off. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said it ‘had failed to deliver a cost-effective vehicle’ but gave no facts to back the claim. The then ABC managing director Mark Scott said the decision:

...runs counter to the approach adopted by the vast majority of G20 countries. Countries around the world are expanding their international broadcasting services as key instruments of public diplomacy.

It sends a strange message to the region that the government does not want to use the most powerful communication tools available to talk to our regional neighbours about Australia.

Killing the network may have satisfied a political ideology but a legal reality prevented a total close-down: As noted earlier, the ABC Charter requires it to be an international broadcaster so the gap had to be filled. The result was *Australia Plus* with a \$20 million budget for three years.

The new service had three ‘foundation partners ...signing-on to advertising deals worth in the low single digit million dollar range’. Presumably this meant something between one and three million dollars a year, so still a minority contribution.

For this the ‘partners’ got the chance to exclusively back an ‘audience category’. So, for example, in the ‘Explore + Experience’ section sponsored by the Victorian State Government ‘stories about events, places, travel, arts, culture and music around Australia’ were supposed to be featured.

This was meant to provide:

‘....an opportunity for Australian businesses and a case study in corporate entrepreneurship ... an endeavour that should be applauded. It is a positive step for the broadcaster, for public institutions in general and for Australian business’.

Absent from the applauders were the 360 Australian businesses which launched a mighty ministerial-led assault on the Indonesian market in 2015, and again last year with 120 delegates.

Not using *Australia Plus* to sell their goods and services suggested they’d driven around the ‘case studies’ and decided the vehicle was a lemon.

They were right. Australia’s overseas TV is supposed to project a robust Western democracy, a creative explorer of art and technology and a leader in education. However *Australia Plus* was not reflecting our skills and diversity in a way to match the rhetoric or the market.

In addition, the advertisements from the main sponsors, Monash University, the Government of Victoria, and food supplement manufacturer Swisse Wellness owned by a Hong Kong based company, missed the mark.

The commercials were repetitious, uncreative and seldom suitable for the audience. Swisse showed how to make cricket balls, while Monash used Kafkaesque images to lure foreign students, an approach that was just plain weird.

Indonesian TV commercials tend to be bright, brisk and unsubtle.

In the absence of information (ABC Management does not acknowledge our polite requests for facts) it seems safe to assume that *Australia Plus* was a failed marriage of public service broadcasting and business.

If Indonesia is our major foreign relationship, as the Government and Opposition say endlessly, it’s logical that we’d transmit our best and brightest programmes selected specifically for the Republic and other nations in the region.

That is not the case. Most offerings have been made for domestic audiences. Sadly it seems no authority cares. Programmes are moved around without notice. Announcers tell what's coming next - then something different appears. The channel's *Internet TV Guide* is unreliable.

Comedy shows have Australians chuckling and Indonesians bamboozled. She'll-be-right scheduling treats viewers with disrespect; the assumption that they won't notice is an insult.

According to the ABC 'the service is delivered as a single stream across all territories. Programmes do not have separate versions for individual territories'. This negates the ABC's claim that:

...the ABC places the audience at the centre of everything it does. Through its international services the ABC has the content and infrastructure to enable it to connect with a range of international audiences in English and their own language, presenting Australian perspectives and values to the world.

In Indonesia three pay-to-use cable services carry *ABC Australia*. They get it free, but the viewers don't, meaning Australian taxpayers are subsidising overseas commercial distributors.

The ABC says its programmes are 'available to three million people in Indonesia' meaning that's the number who pay for access to networks each offering 50 or more channels.

ABC Australia programmes are almost all in English. Those from *Nat Geo* are subtitled in Indonesian. Likewise the *History Channel*, *Animal Planet*, *Discovery*, *BBC Earth* and many others, including crime and food channels.

There are other *ABC Australia* on-line sites with stories in Indonesian, including Facebook which scored 365,000 visits last year. That sounds a lot, but Indonesian motivational speaker Mario Teguh, who used to perform on *Metro TV* (one of the least popular stations), got 20 million hits.

We are the closest Western nation to Indonesia with the ability to present a different and independent perspective in the media jungle of Southeast Asia. The views of the many Australian academic experts on Indonesia are rarely heard, unless they've first featured in print.

Australia Plus claimed its mission was 'to provide a television and digital service that informs, entertains and inspires our audience with an uniquely Australian perspective.'

Policy has changed with *ABC Australia*. It now says its content is 'for Australians living abroad' and in a tautological addition 'local audiences living outside of Australia'. Which is why Rules rules.

In Indonesia the principal sports are soccer, badminton and *silat* (martial arts).

What's offered?

Schedules change, but back-to-back State news and AFL are the main fare. Viewers also get *Play School* and *Little Ted's Big Adventure* on a loop for much of the morning plus a few English lessons.

ABC News Breakfast starts at 3 am in Jakarta. *World News* at 7 pm - and frequently later when sport gets in the way.

At 6 pm Java time *Matter of Fact* is shown, taking the timespot sometimes used by 730. *Q & A* used to run a day late but is now broadcast direct. There used to be old editions of *Australia Story* and the brilliant Jenny Brockie SBS series *Insight* - though no longer. Weeklies like *Insiders* and *The Drum* get a guernsey. *Four Corners* does occasionally, though late.

Apart from the English lessons and *The World*, all have been made primarily for Australian viewers.

This provincialism was most striking on the evening of Monday 16 July when most international services were covering the Trump-Putin meetings. *ABC Australia* ran the *Helpmann Awards* in *The World* timeslot. The next programme was a State news bulletin leading with a triple murder in a Perth suburb.

Cooperation

While this submission focuses on the way we present ourselves abroad, the other relevant issue is how news is gathered overseas and relayed to Australian audiences.

Stretching the general definition of Asia Pacific, the ABC has four newsrooms - Beijing, Port Moresby, Tokyo and Jakarta. It also has home-based reporters in Bangkok and New Delhi.

In 2014 it was reported that budget cuts had forced the ABC to slash 80 staff in its overseas services. Last year AAP closed its Jakarta office after 35 years, and Fairfax Media combined the positions of Southeast Asia and Indonesia correspondent. It appears News Ltd has done the same.

Consequently it's no surprise surveys show about a quarter of Australians don't know Indonesia is a democracy - while most would be more familiar with the names of US politicians and Supreme Court judges than their counterparts in Indonesia.

The Indonesian news agency *Antara*, which generates copy in English and is supposed to be independent of government, largely confines itself to covering natural disasters and rewriting media releases - often doing so badly.

Australia has been working with, and helping train, the Indonesian police, army and other services. Assisting *Antara* staff to improve their journalistic skills would also boost Australian-Indonesian relationships.

Conclusion

ABC Australia remains a one-size-fits-all mishmash which ignores regional differences and treats its audiences with contempt.

It is not being produced to meet the needs of the targeted countries. It does not recognise local viewing times, or provide captions in the national language.

The New York headquartered *Bloomberg* channel screened in Indonesia carries more news and comment about the Asia Pacific than Sydney-based *ABC Australia*.

Recommendation

- * Either legislation is changed to delete the ABC's obligation to provide an international channel, or enough cash and resources are allocated to do the job properly.
- * If the service is to be maintained it must be funded as a stand-alone network able to hire expert staff, commission programmes to suit the region, and muster material from services like SBS and independent Australian film-makers.
- * If not, then Australia should yield the field to the Americans, British, French, Germans, Japanese, Russians, Chinese and others - and say openly to Asia-Pacific nationals: '*ABC Australia* is not for you; it's only for our citizens abroad.'

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