

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

Jan Forrester

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

My submission includes a brief personal reflection of a time when I believe Australia/ns displayed a refreshing confidence internationally.

It includes a particular time in the early 1990s when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC, was managing a three-year training project in three Mekong countries - Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR.

The project was informed by a wider vision of creating deep and continuing relationships with our local media colleagues, those being trained, local officials connected to our project, with other Australians working in the region – and importantly with a wide range of local people.

All three countries were slowly opening the doors to the world following the last Indo China war, additionally in Cambodia the years of the Khmer Rouge.

It was an extraordinary moment.

No issue, problem, challenge we had during this project, and others on which very capable ABC personnel have worked, disturbed me as much as Australia's essential withdrawal from maintaining an independent, engaged continued, broadcast voice in the Indo-Pacific region.

I am therefore hopeful that this review may enable us to re-envision how Australia will communicate with the Indo-Pacific on many levels: a broadcast/online presence being the key enabling channel.

That vision accepts the need for sustained and outward-focussed leadership in government, the Parliament, the public sector, business, education, sport, the arts - and creatively managing risk in dealing with the challenges ahead.

## **An active ABC in South East Asia in the 1990s – a quick overview of one project**

I was the Hanoi-based regional manager of an Australian Government-funded and ABC-managed broadcast training project to three Mekong countries (Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam). This involved approximately 100 visiting ABC trainers, the creation of 80 course templates and around 700 people trained. The ABC would have firmer statistics.

I shared an office with the ABC's first Hanoi-based correspondents, Christopher Kremmer and later, Peter Mares.

Both journalists were also dealing regularly with media bureaucracies in the three countries which were also coming to terms with a wider international media presence.

(I subsequently worked with UNICEF in Bangkok on HIV/AIDS media projects across SE Asia.

I then worked at the Bangkok Post as a sub-editor.

I also worked in Singapore for a US-owned start-up satellite distribution company, headed by an Australian).

In 1993, when Australia Television first broadcast to the Indo-Pacific a much broader Australian presence and enterprise were beginning to make an impact in many countries.

Locals in East and South-East Asia in particular were noticing that Australians were *replacing the British as leaders in English language education* - in concept and delivery according to local needs.

*Australian universities* were actively pursuing opportunities that would expand our international tertiary sector cooperation as well as expand international students studying in Australia – to the level it is today.

Telstra was operating in Cambodia and was a notable player in northern Vietnam. The ANZ Bank opened in Hanoi, facing the challenges of a first mover in a country where financial regulation was well below international standards. The Packer's Vietnam Investment Review commenced local publication.

Australia was also represented in an international research collaboration at the Hanoi Institution of Information Technology, which lead, in 1992, to the first limited dial-up international connection in Vietnam via the Australian National University. <https://blog.apnic.net/2017/02/24/vnseries-netnam-still-incubating-internet-firsts/>

## **Some local officials noted what the ABC had achieved**

When I departed the ABC Mekong Broadcasting project, which then continued in Cambodia, a key Vietnamese counterpart told me that, **at project commencement, he did not believe the ABC would be able to achieve what it did.**

## **How did the ABC do it?**

At the outset, and over the life of the project, key ABC Australia-based managers and I focussed on relationship-building: not only of key local stakeholders but people in the arts/education etc in the wider community. We all followed a consciously continued those relationships, in all three countries. We found good colleagues in all countries, and Australians who were helpful and encouraging, including local Australian diplomats and those in the development sector, then AusAID.

Critically, at trainer level the project recruited committed people who worked through local translators to deliver the ABC Training Department's excellent courses. Our courses helped bring modern broadcasting techniques to a model that locals knew was moribund.

This included a much-valued music production course that helped raise local recording production values which were evident on-air.

We developed or maintained relationships that assisted the project through transitions: In advance of the project's conclusion in Vietnam and physical move to Cambodia, helpful Australian diplomats advised us on potential local conflict in Cambodia around upcoming elections that would, and subsequently did, require risk management.

Above all: There was a very strong, shared belief that, by consciously nurturing personal/professional relationships, by learning more deeply about the countries in which we worked, we were not just doing our jobs, we were contributing to broader, wider, longer links between our organisations and other Australian endeavours.

These are some of the reasons I believe the ABC was successful in managing an initially challenging project, to which many ABC people contributed ideas and support with great goodwill.

As did local colleagues.

## **A small example: relationship-building with consistency is important**

On my last trip to Vietnam, around 2006, I found Chinese students studying, in English, at Hanoi University for an Australian degree from La Trobe University.

The Hanoi University rector had, as a young man, studied English in Australia under a scholarship I believe.

Prior to his term at Hanoi University, in the 1990s, he ran a Hanoi-based Vietnamese-English language translation service that the ABC broadcast training project utilised.

He was a great champion of the project within Vietnam.

When I last met him in Vietnam, around 2006, he was Vietnam's Vice-Minister of Education.

It is a story replicated hundreds of times: we need to harness the meaning of such stories with a larger, continuing broadcast and communications presence in the Indo-Pacific, one that values such relationships.

**What has this taught me in terms of the current review?**

*In broadcasting to the region, we have pressed the stop/pause button too often.* Now we are aware that we have a lot of company in Indo-Pacific broadcasting, and some have deep pockets, ie the BBC is increasing funding to regional coverage, Al Jazeera has considerable funding reserves as does China State broadcasting to the region.

International public diplomacy does not sleep, neither does broadcasting, in its widest sense. Australia's broadcasting effort has not been enhanced either by contested contracts in the past and funding cuts more recently.

Peter Marks' report is an excellent example of the kind of strategic technological vision that is required in a much-needed re-set of Australian broadcasting to the Indo-Pacific. We need an independent broadcasting organisation that has excellent governance, management with a strategic vision, a considerably, a more realistic ongoing budget – and the best managers and multi-lingual broadcasters we can find.

The Facebook page Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific has shown the range and depth of support for an internationally focussed broadcast/communications presence in the Indo-Pacific. I hope the outcome serves Australia and Indo-Pacific well - and long.

I am very grateful this inquiry was initiated.

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