

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

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Dear Sir/Madam,

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this Review and to share my thoughts from the perspective of a 30-year career in International Broadcasting and Media Capacity Development in Asia and the Pacific. I was Head of Radio Australia for ten years (1997-2007) during a period when the organisation was successful in 'transitioning' to an innovative multi platform strategy such as that suggested by this review. I have since been extensively involved in media capacity development programs in the Asia Pacific region.

I seek to make a few observations on which I will be happy to expand, should you feel it useful.

1. A timely debate

The horse has bolted. Australia has lost its prominent profile in the Asia Pacific media landscape and has vacated this space to other countries more keenly aware of the economic and political dividends resulting from an international public profile. More than ever, Australia needs to make the modest commitment required to regain its own profile and to develop new strategies that are both innovative and relevant to the region's diverse media environment.

Digital technology is spreading, yet the free flow of information in Asia and the Pacific is far from benefitting everyone and is being stifled by authoritarian regimes, increasing censorship or technical and governance capacity issues. More than ever, there is a need for a tailored approach and an information safety net that maintains an essential information flow on key strategic and development issues, preferably from an Australian perspective.

Much is made in the Western World of the debate about 'fake news', but in the Asia Pacific context, it is not unrealistic to raise the issue of 'Information Safety' as part of the 'Human Security' concept, i.e. access to relevant and credible information that fosters trust and stability thus underpinning much of Australia's engagement with the region in the areas of governance, security and development.

2. Widespread, but not 'universal' media reach

It can be argued that, with digital technology, most Australian media outlets and broadcasters (public, commercial or community) now reach countries in the Asia Pacific region. Whether in written, audio, video or social media formats they can be accessed throughout the region.

The ABC's Australia Plus TV service is widely available on cable. Domestic broadcasters SBS, Seven, Nine and Ten are also commercially pirated for rebroadcast in several Pacific countries. In other words, our publicly funded international broadcasters (Radio Australia, Australia Plus) do not have a monopoly anymore on how we communicate and interact with the general public in the Asia Pacific.

Our major newspapers, universities and key information outlets also reach audiences through their internet websites and social media platforms. But, are they readily accessible? Who do they reach? How effectively do they engage audiences and the general public in our region?

Cable TV, as we know, only has a limited audience; often expatriates who can afford the subscription. The use of the English language is growing in Asia and the Pacific but remains limited to educated classes. Australian-centred content has limited relevance and appeal to audiences who now have increased access to other platforms and sources of content.

It is one objective to produce and broadcast media content. It is another to engage media users on a platform of their choice and build new audiences in the Asia Pacific.

3. 'Agnostic' technology strategy

With the demise, two years ago, of the last of Radio Australia's shortwave (SW) broadcasting capacity to the Pacific, we are today revisiting an issue already considered...20 years ago! In 1997, the government shut down all Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts to Asia on the premise that the future was now with TV.

When the ABC announced two years ago the end of the last of its SW broadcasts to the Pacific, it explained this was 'ahead of a transition to FM transmission'. This was the very strategy developed by Radio Australia in...1997! Radio Australia then developed an innovative approach that gave priority to program content and audience engagement, ahead of particular transmission delivery technologies such as SW broadcasting, etc..

Shifting depleted resources from SW transmission to digital online production, satellite delivery and local FM rebroadcasts and relays, Radio Australia reinvented itself. By 2007, it had successfully negotiated some 150 rebroadcast agreements in two dozen countries in the Asia Pacific. It had established 15 x 24hour local FM relays and its multilingual website was one of the more innovative at the ABC. It was involved in media capacity development programs in PNG, Vanuatu, Solomons, Cambodia and Timor Leste, etc...

The ABC has since then had to make hard decisions about its international operation under further budgetary pressure from government. However, what remains is that the success of Radio Australia's short lived revival rested on its technical flexibility, its responsiveness to changing media environments in the Asia Pacific and its policy of active 'diplomatic' engagement with the region's governments and media outlets.

4. Engagement and 'Proximity'

Before considering reintroducing or not technologies such as shortwave broadcasting and committing new levels of resources, serious thought needs to be given to defining first the objectives of Australian Broadcasting Services for the Asia Pacific. How we decide to develop effective models of public engagement with the various communities in Asia and the Pacific will determine how best to reach audiences and what will be the most appropriate technologies.

Do we want to limit ourselves to a promotional operation for Australia?...to be yet another international news network?...or a 'home away from home' service mainly directed at Australian expatriates throughout the region? These approaches have all been tried and tested before but with limited success in terms of reaching regional audiences.

Do we seek, rather, to present Australia to a broad audience as an integral regional partner, a credible and well-meaning point of reference in the Asia Pacific region for focussed and relevant economic, social, political information and debate on development issues of mutual interest?

My own experience and research into current developments in the region certainly suggest more than ever that in order to effectively reach and engage broad audiences we need to demonstrate

that Australia is part of the Asia Pacific and wants to engage positively with the region. To achieve this, we need to develop a strategy based on **linkages, networks** and **technical versatility**. There is no one size-fits-all centralised approach, but digital technology provides the ideal tools to reach multiple audiences.

An Australian Asia Pacific regional broadcasting service in a strategically competitive age also needs to move beyond the country's insularity. It needs to shift from a traditional Australia-centric and Australia-centred model to that of a **region-based network**. This applies across the board to the key areas of: Content Production, Content Delivery and Audience Engagement.

A. Content Production: from single source Broadcaster to networked Content Provider.

All content to be digitally produced in text/audio/video/social formats; production to move away from a traditional centralised model in as much as there needs to remain an essential and central coordination/editorial role for an Australia-based operation responsible for policy/commissioning work/monitoring/development. This would involve:

- **linking** with Australian organisations, companies and aid programs **already** engaged with the region in order not just to highlight their activities but to **co develop** content with them. It could cover a wide spectrum of facets of Australian regional engagement: business, education, disaster preparedness and management, agriculture, resource management, climate change, sport, trade, tourism, seasonal work, etc...
- **connecting** with Asia Pacific communities in Australia to **leverage** their linguistic ability and their cultural sensitivity to reflect our commonalities with our neighbours and provide in accessible languages and formats essential information on key issues of Australia life such as: employment, immigration, work, health, education, housing, social and cultural issues, etc...
- developing discreet **regional production hubs** in key centres in the Asia Pacific in order to feed in on-the-ground content to the network on key regional developments: economics, environment, governance, health, education, art, culture, etc...Local production would ensure **relevance through proximity** as content would be sourced locally. The presence of these small hubs would have the added benefit of giving Australian regional involvement a heightened profile through a commitment to using local talent and to local capacity development, through local commissioning and secondments.

B. Audience engagement: wider reach via digital distribution and analogue local delivery.

Digital technology and online access have radically changed the media landscape in the region. Access is widespread in Asia; however, it is still patchy and far from universal in the Pacific. The digital divide remains an issue as access and affordability issues limit the reach of online/telephony delivery. The last link in the information chain - the analogue link - remains essential in order to achieve broader reach. This issue of 'multi platform' delivery calls for a **networked** rather than a centralised delivery strategy.

- **Digital content distribution.** Radio Australia started diversifying its broadcasting strategy with a move to local relays by taking advantage of satellite technology that provided broad coverage across Asia and the Pacific. Satellite delivery requires however costly uplink facilities, the purchase of bandwidth from satellite operators and ongoing costs associated with the purchase, maintenance and operation of multiple downlinks in target countries.

Online digital distribution now offers a ready-made, cost effective technology to deliver multiple streams of program content in a variety of languages. Increased access and bandwidth across the Asia Pacific also enables point-to-point data transfer in all formats. As well as establishing its own online presence (website, App, social media, etc..), a future Asia Pacific service will significantly expand audience reach by feeding content to a **network of key local rebroadcasters and local social media platforms.**

- **Analogue delivery: a network of local partner broadcasters/distributors.** Surveys over the past 20 years have consistently shown that audiences in the Asia Pacific privilege their own local media outlets, rather than foreign media, even if these are available on their own local stand alone service (FM radio, Cable or Free to Air TV). Put simply, local broadcast partners have the capacity to reach audiences throughout their country. They provide the **final analogue link** essential to reach broad audiences. Australian content, if it can be part of general programming on local stations, gains added credibility.

Relevance and appeal need to be the key criteria for any networked content to engage local audiences and ensure rebroadcasts. Just as content and language would need to be appropriate and accessible, so would formats need to suit local rebroadcasters. Well targeted content of specific duration (1 - 2 hours daily?) would achieve in limited daily 'windows' more than ongoing, uneconomical and not always relevant 'blanket' broadcasts as was the case in the past.

The development of a revamped **partner broadcast network** through which content could not only be distributed but also co-produced locally is key to an effective partnership strategy to success. The development of relationships necessary to the establishment of this rebroadcast and co-production network could be supported by existing capacity building activities already funded through DFAT.

C. Independence and Emergency: the case for maintaining a targeted shortwave service

- The days of continuous 'Australia-based' long distance shortwave broadcasting are over. The past twenty years have seen a steady drop in listenership, even in countries (in the Pacific in particular, but also Indonesia & Timor Leste) where majority audiences are located in rural or provincial areas. The cost of 24x7 SW broadcasting is comparatively high, and Australia, unlike New Zealand, has lost much of its expertise and capacity in this area.

Yet, political upheavals, natural disasters, censorship and geopolitical considerations dictate that, beyond an ongoing digital stream and an effective local rebroadcast network, a revamped regional service requires **independent and reliable long distance means to reach audiences** across the region at key times of need.

- Given cost considerations and the strategy of local engagement outlined above, well targeted and **focussed daily direct broadcasts of time-sensitive programming** should also be made available across the Asia Pacific for a specific number of hours daily. This strategy was adopted in recent years by other regional players and has proved successful.
- For radio, this would translate in early morning and evening daily **digital/analogue SW** broadcasts, of time-sensitive content such as information on weather, warnings, news and key topical developments. On Television, the same could be achieved via satellite.
- Such a presence over the airwaves would send a clear signal, internationally, that Australia is serious about engaging with our immediate region by reclaiming its historical place in the media landscape, at a time when other interests are moving in.

D. An Integrated Management Model: Public-Private-Community

- **The ABC** has historically been tasked with projecting Australian views and values to the Asia Pacific region. It is part of its Charter obligation and it has carried out this role through its international service Radio Australia, and now Australia Plus.

Today, following ongoing budget cuts and the cessation of government funding for a cable TV service, there remains a satellite radio, online and TV operation that relays mainly

domestic programming of limited appeal to external audiences, with some limited regional content on radio and online.

However, Australia's public engagement with our neighbours cannot remain at the mercy of a fractious relationship between government and the national broadcaster. Following the example of other major international media players in the Asia Pacific, Australia needs to plan for the long term. This requires bi-partisan commitment and stability over time through workable arrangements.

- **A fresh approach for a new age.**

The national interest is at stake in the delivery of international broadcasting services. The ABC's challenge to fulfil both its domestic and its international mandates with an adequate level of resources has been compounded by damaging past experiences with commercial operators that proved internationally embarrassing. Private operators priorities are understandably profit driven and their focus is too culturally narrow to engage the Asia Pacific region and reflect the wide scope of Australia's foreign policy objectives and engagement with the region.

A key role however can be played by **private sector interests** such as telecommunication companies to become partners in the distribution of content across the region. In the digital age, broadcasters do not need anymore to own and operate transmission or online delivery facilities. Telcos are ideally suited to take over that function.

Publicly-funded multimedia players such as Australia's own multicultural broadcaster **SBS** can also offer proven experience operating successfully jointly with commercial interests to deliver public interest value. They should clearly be considered as a viable option to join in the development of a new Asia Pacific regional services.

To a large extent, Australia's public broadcasters with a track record in private sector and community engagement meet many of the key criteria required to re-engage audiences in the Asia Pacific:

- **Credibility** through political, commercial and editorial independence from domestic and foreign influence.
- **International focus**, multilingual capacity and multicultural sensitivity to engage with media partners and audiences in the Asia Pacific.
- **Connections** with Australia's own Asia Pacific communities to strengthen links and a sense of regional identity with Australia's neighbours.
- **Operational and technical capacity** to commission, produce and coordinate the distribution of broadcast and digital services across the region.
- **Proven business development** capacity to engage the private sector to support commercially and to help in the delivery of digital content internationally.
- **Experience in commissioning content** from independent producers and contributors.
- **Lean and cost effective** management structures, limited to policy development and management, content commissioning and monitoring, regional network distribution and business and capacity development.

- **Domestic engagement and regional conversation**

Australia's public affairs policy in the Asia Pacific region can hardly afford to suffer again from inconsistency and a record of active public engagement followed by long and unexplained periods of neglect. '**Why don't you speak to us anymore?**' have been asking our neighbours from Malaysia to Vanuatu and the Pacific following the end of our broadcasts. Our silence conveys the unintended message that Australia is not 'on speaking terms with its neighbours' anymore.

Present geostrategic developments dictate that Australia maintains an ongoing dialogue with the general public in the region. This cannot be achieved solely through diplomatic, political or commercial channels. It requires the involvement of general public opinion across the Asia Pacific and within Australia.

To that end, it will be essential that digital and broadcast content generated to highlight Australia's links with its region be also promoted and made **available to online and radio/TV audiences in Australia**. Such a service will foster not just a much needed greater awareness domestically of the Asia Pacific region, but will also facilitate a broad and ongoing regional conversation between Australians and their neighbours, via the use of social media, etc...The model is not new. It already exists in the UK and France via BBC World Service or Radio France Internationale who are locally available on FM.

- **Targeted and long term commitment**

In order to minimise the vulnerability of Australia's international engagement to the vagaries of domestic political agendas and the slow erosion of our capacity to communicate effectively with our Asia Pacific neighbours, it is essential that our renewed commitment be clearly targeted and governed.

Whether the ABC, SBS or other agencies with public, commercial and community credentials are tasked with developing and delivering regional broadcasting services, the funding of these services will need to be quarantined from the general operation of these supporting structures, as they already have their own priorities. Funding will be granted on an ongoing basis but in line with clear objectives and targets and monitored under separate governance provisions.

Not unlike major DFAT-funded development programmes, Asia Pacific broadcasting services should come under their own **discreet Board of Management** with representation from the media, commercial and community sector as well as media or other **representatives from Asia and the Pacific**.

This regional involvement at the very top of the governance structure of the new services will ensure that they remain relevant and close to reality on the ground. It will also affirm the strong regional identity of these services and give them a unique local 'buy in', thus stating Australia's long term engagement and commitment to the Asia Pacific.

I am confident this new approach for revamped Australian broadcasting services in the Asia Pacific, as outlined above, would be a successful and cost-effective strategy to re-engage with public opinion in our region.

Let me hope these suggestions will be useful in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Jean-Gabriel Manguy